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APPLEDORE FARM.

APPLEDORE FARM

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

WARD AND DOWNEY

(Limited)

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.

1894

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APPLEDORE FARM.

Book the *Fifth* (*continued*).

CHAPTER I.

It seemed to Ruth, as she went up the lane, that Michael was disposed to listen to her suggestion about the journey to France ; she had only to persevere, and she should persuade him to go. She therefore shortened her walk, and gave up the visit she had meant to pay Lucy Voce and little George. The boy's quaint childish talk was always an amusement to her, even in these sad days, but she was impatient to return to the subject of Michael's journey to Burgundy, and she saw that she could not get back to Appledore in time for a talk with him, if she went on to Little Marshfield.

Her determination to succeed had recalled her old daring, and she looked much more cheerful on her return when she approached the gate.

Michael heard the click as she raised the latch. He came out to meet her.

"You see I have not been long," she said; she passed him, and went into the parlour. Her heart beat a little more quickly when, looking at him, she saw what she called his sentimental expression in his eyes; but she did not give him time for any loving words.

"Have you been thinking over your journey?" she said abruptly, and then smiling, "it seems such a good time for you to go now, does it not?"

She stood facing him; she felt that he had come closer to her while she spoke, and he suddenly, she thought masterfully, took both her hands.

"I have a better plan than that, my darling. Your father is willing to move whenever we wish, so that you and I have only to fix the day for your coming home

to me, my own precious wife." He pressed her hands warmly, while Ruth felt every moment more cold and trembling, as she stood like a statue unable to move or even to look up.

"Sit down, darling," he said ; " what a stupid fellow I am to keep you standing after your walk," then as he placed himself beside her on the sofa, and slipped his arm round her waist, he murmured in a low tone : " I suppose I can hardly think, I am so happy ; it is such a joy, my sweet girl, to think of your being so soon at Purley."

She did not draw herself away, she was nerving herself for one more effort.

" I really don't think father knows how weak he is ; but I know," she said earnestly, " to move him now may undo all that he has gained ; it would be wrong and selfish to run such a risk."

If she could have looked into his eyes and smiled at him perhaps he might have yielded, but she looked away, and her strained manner, her nervous shrinking

from his arm, which still lay round her waist, opened Michael's eyes to a conviction of the truth ; there seemed to him something behind her words, something that was more like aversion than the blushing modest timidity he had fondly pictured while he waited for her ; her attitude was hard and unloving, and the hardness seemed every moment to increase.

It was increasing. Ruth saw as in a flash that she had been of set purpose trying to act a lie, so that she might free herself from her most unwelcome husband. . . . As she saw it she suddenly flung her purpose from her, she could not again speak of the French journey, it was, she knew, only a pitiful subterfuge.

Michael took his arm away ; he rose, and stood before her. She dared not look up, though she longed to know whether he was angry with her.

"To-day is Monday," he said in a dull level tone, as if only the matter in hand was in his mind, "I gathered from the doctor that your father may be safely

moved next Thursday ; will that day suit your arrangements ? ”

She looked up now, he thought her eyes had a wild expression as they strayed round the room. He waited for her to speak, then, as her silence continued, a frown settled on his face.

“ As to that journey to France,” he said in a hard voice, “ there is no use in proposing it to me ; is it likely that I could desert you in that way ? ”

Her lip quivered, but she did not speak.

Michael left her, and walked away, such a storm of anger had mastered him that he was ashamed of his own feelings ; he reminded himself, however, that he had promised Philip Bryant to settle the time for leaving Appledore.

“ Shall we say Thursday, or will you leave it till next week ? Your father said the sooner the better, and Dr. Buchan used almost the same words as he and I parted.”

The strain had become too intense, it suddenly snapped. Ruth felt desperate

and reckless, this was her last chance of escape.

She rose and steadily looked at Michael, she flung away any attempt at deceit, and felt suddenly bold and careless as to what he might think ; she knew that what she had to say would irritate him beyond endurance.

“ You want us to leave Appledore because of the new tenant, well then we can go any day you like, but not to Purley ; you must not ask me to live there with you ; I cannot do it,—I will not.”

He stepped forward and grasped her arm, his face had a dark flush on it.

“ What do you mean ? ” he said sternly, “ you will not ? You are my wife ; what do you mean, Ruth ? ”

No one had ever spoken to Ruth in so masterful a tone, it roused her spirit to yet more active rebellion. She haughtily raised her head and returned his stern look ; she was far more composed than he was, she had already gone through this scene in anticipation, while he was taken by surprise.

“I mean,” she said slowly, but with cold decision, “I cannot do my duty as your wife ; I have no love to give you.”

She paused, she wanted him to question her.

Michael stood silent ; her manner filled him with horror ; he hung breathlessly on her words.

The silence continued till Ruth’s longing for freedom overcame all scruples, all thought for any feeling besides her own.

“I cannot go anywhere to be with you,” she said in a high stubborn tone, “I love another man.”

When she had said it her courage left her, she stood looking at him in terror.

He remained silent and motionless, her words did not seem to affect him ; in reality he was stupefied. He had not at first believed that she was speaking the truth ; he could not believe that this candid, upright girl, on whose honour he would have wagered his own, could have spread such a snare for him.

At last he said hoarsely,—

“Are you in earnest?” Then more slowly, “If you are, you are as bad a woman as I have ever known; but is this true? Answer me.”

She bent her head, she could not steady her voice to speak.

His voice was so stern as he went on that it sounded fierce,—

“Why have I not heard this before? How dared you marry me? How dared you swear before God to be my true and loving wife, when you knew it was a black falsehood? What had I done to you, Ruth?” He went on more quietly, “Why have you wronged me like this? Why did you not tell me this wretched story before I married you?”

Standing there, her eyes bent on the ground, Ruth had been asking herself the same question; now as she looked up and saw the honest dignity that dominated the pain in his face, a quick and strange revulsion passed over her; she and Michael seemed to have changed places; it was she who had injured him, she had

cheated him, she had even lied to gain her ends.

She longed to kneel down and ask his forgiveness, but confusion and shame kept her silent.

He kept himself from looking at her.

“You can at least say something,” he said at last.

“There is no excuse for me,” she said humbly. “I know that this other person.—I mean that Mr. Bevington has given me up; it has been all my own fault; you can think as badly of me as you choose;” she paused, then added, “it would have been worse still to let you go on thinking I had any love to give you.”

He was too angry to be touched by her submission; his sense of justice had become confused, and his anger deepened, because he could not vent it on her when she owned that she had no excuse.

She did not ask to be forgiven, she felt herself to be too guilty; she longed to get away and hide herself from her husband's contempt. She stood before him with

bent head and clasped hands waiting for his judgment.

“I cannot talk to you now, I must think;” then an after-thought came to him, “still, as I am married to you, there are one or two questions I had better ask at once.”

He spoke with such stinging bitterness that she clasped her hands closer with a look of keen suffering.

“Was there ever any engagement between you and this—this—gentleman—? as you, I presume, call him, I call him a scoundrel.”

“I thought I was engaged to him; we wrote to one another as if we were engaged, and he came three times to see me; that was all.”

Her calmness, as she began, surprised him, but Ruth felt as if she were talking of some one else, the Ruth who had met Reginald Bevington in the Mill Glen was so far away from her present guilty self. Her last words brought back her companion's sternness.

“All! that was all!” he repeated between his closed teeth. He waited a minute. Then, “May I ask you how this intercourse was broken off?” his face darkened, “has he seen you since you accepted my proposal?”

She raised her head with a momentary return of self-respect.

“I am not so bad, so lost, as you think,” she said; “the last time he came I—I saw he did not mean to marry me, and I told him he must not see me again. It is better that we should never meet, but—but—” she covered her face with her hands, “I cannot forget him, I cannot.”

She tried to check her sobs.

Michael longed to be face to face with Bevington, and to horsewhip him as long as he could stand over him. He turned his back on Ruth; she was, he believed, innocent, but it outraged him to see her crying for a man who would, he believed, have ruined her if he had had the chance. He walked up and down the long room, trying to calm himself.

Ruth stood where he had left her, her head bent, her arms hanging straight beside her; she felt bound to stand there till she learned whether she was free, or what was going to happen.

After a while he stood still, but he did not go near her.

"I will see you to-morrow, if I can," he said; "if not to-morrow, next day. I must plan out what is to be done; but mind this, not a word to your father of what has passed. I shall plan it so that it will seem to be my doing, not yours." He stopped, then he went on more harshly: "It will not be seeming either, it is my doing. You must have had a strange opinion of me, if you thought I would take a girl for my wife who belongs to another man."

She felt that he was unjust; she had said that all was over between her and Mr. Bevington. She knew she had so wronged Michael Clifford, that she had lost her right to protest; he must say any-

thing he chose, she had fully deserved his contempt.

He paused when he reached the door, turned round and looked at her. The look seemed to scorch her, she never forgot it.

“It is beyond belief,” he seemed to be talking to himself, “that a creature can look so pure and true, and yet be so deceitful. You have ruined both our lives ; but I will not have your poor father made more unhappy than he must be at leaving his old home ; he shall not be told the truth. You can say to him that no time is yet settled between us for leaving this place.”

He bent his head and went out of the room without any further leave-taking.

CHAPTER II.

IT was fortunate for Michael Clifford that he had much practical work to accomplish in a short time. He had small opportunity for the consideration of his own feelings; but in any case he would probably have turned from contemplating them, his nature was too strong for indulgence in self-pity. The only indulgence of feeling he now permitted himself was an intense indignation against young Bevington and against Ruth.

With his usual prompt decision he settled on a plan which would separate him from his wife, and yet avoid any open scandal. Ruth and her father should go quietly to the little seaside place where the honeymoon was to have begun, and he should account for her absence from Purley

by the fact that he was adding a couple of bedrooms to his house in Broad Street. He had wished to do this before he married, but the shortness of his engagement had made it impracticable. The house was so old that this addition of new brickwork would probably occasion unlooked-for and lengthy repairs to the original fabric; the longer the better, he thought, for him and for his shattered hopes. He should not be much in Purley, but he settled that his office should not be interfered with; there were several distant journeys he had from time to time been asked to take, among them the talked-of expedition to Burgundy, singularly distasteful now, because it called up a memory of Ruth's deceit.

He thought, however, that it might make a good beginning, and the fact of his taking so long a journey would account for his leaving his wife and her father to establish themselves by the seaside. Michael Clifford did not really set much store by public opinion, but he had lived the greater part of his life in a country town, and he was

therefore well aware of the ravenous appetite for gossip in the provincial mind. He despised it. He had often told his sister, when they two were safe from eavesdroppers, that the Purley people likened themselves to pigs by the greediness of their curiosity concerning their neighbours' affairs; but in spite of his contempt for this mindless folly, he would not yield a shred of the tragedy that had developed in the place of his own expected happiness to the tender mercies of his fellow townsfolk. He would not even trust Dr. Buchan, but gravely consulted him about the suitability of Dolmouth as a temporary home for Mr. Bryant, till the house in Broad Street should be again fit for habitation.

Dr. Buchan looked inquisitive when these plans were told him, but Michael's steady gaze over-awed even his coolness; though he tried to point out how Sally Voce could take care of Mr. Bryant, while Ruth accompanied her husband on the various journeys he had mentioned.

"I thought you told me, doctor,"

Michael said gravely, "your opinion was, that my dear old friend has, at longest, only a few months before him; unless, indeed, he should gain a great deal more strength before winter?"

Dr. Buchan bent his head.

"That is my opinion, my deliberate opinion," he said pompously; "but, my dear sir, I may err, we are all liable to error; in other words, we are human; still I ask myself how will it be with your wife? I understand and respect your wish not to part her from her father; but how will it be should her father be taken from her during your absence on one of the distant journeys—you—you contemplate?"

Having said this with more than ordinary pomposity, the doctor raised his eyebrows, gave his short nose an upward tilt, and pinched up his lips till they looked like a red screw-hole.

Clifford gave a weary smile, he admired the doctor's tenacity, but he did not intend to reward it. He excused it, however, on the ground that every doctor has certain

patients to whom a highly spiced bit of news is far more welcome than a prescription.

“I shall take care to provide against such a mischance. Supposing that I am out of England, which I hope may not be the case, I shall arrange for Dorothy to go and stay with my wife at Dolmouth, or, if this house should be finished, they will come here.”

The doctor's suspicions were lulled, and, as he recalled the conversation on his way to see another patient, he fancied that he himself had suggested Dolmouth as likely to benefit Philip Bryant, and also as a desirable seclusion for a young and beautiful wife in the absence of her husband.

Michael had determined not to confide his terrible secret to any one; he therefore meant to write his instructions, instead of going to Scotland to see Dorothy. He could easily baffle ordinary curiosity, but he shrank from meeting his sister's keen eyes, he knew that he could not hide his sorrow

from her sympathetic insight. He remembered her warning about Ruth, and at the time he had thought her jealous and prejudiced, and had fancied himself wise! Yesterday, before he had ridden a mile from Appledore, he resolved not to see Ruth again; the very sight of her would, he knew, rob him of all self-control, he should probably reproach her, he should certainly feel vehemently angry; it was useless, he thought, to expose himself to such a trial. In some ways, too, it might be better not to see Philip Bryant, he might suspect that all was not right; in every way it was better to write to both father and daughter.

“Letter-writing is a blessed invention,” he said sadly; “it helps to soften much that would sound very cruel if it had to be spoken.”

But while he thought this his lip curled at his own weakness; he knew that his anger against his wife was just, why, then, did he wish to spare her any of the trial she had brought on herself? He could not answer the question; he could only tell

himself that it was better to keep away from Appledore ; but as the hours went by he became more restless and dissatisfied. He wrote to Ruth mere formal directions, without referring to her avowal, and then he wrote cheerfully to Philip Bryant, pointing out the advantage the new rooms would be in Broad Street, and also the benefit which sea-air might bring him. He went out himself to post the letters ; then he sent for the best builder in Purley, went over the house with him, listened to his opinion, and gave his instructions ; all was to be done as well and thoroughly as possible ; but Mr. Clifford did not urge speed, the builder noticed that his employer did not even name a date by which he wished the alterations completed.

The next day found Michael Clifford at Dolmouth ; he wished to make sure that the lodgings he had chosen for the summer would be suited to an invalid in winter-time. As yet, Michael did not attempt to look forward ; he recoiled from the idea of spending his life with a woman who did

not love him, a woman who had simply used him as a means of securing a home for herself and for her father; he found it impossible to look forward to a time when he might be called on to receive his wife in the old house in Broad Street.

The owner of the Dolmouth lodging, Mrs. Rimell, was a woman of forbidding appearance; her pale, sallow skin, seamed with wrinkles, was not beautified by the contrast afforded by her cap, a bit of real old lace, much blued in the washing, and surmounted by a bow, and ends of violet satin ribbon; two long lace cap-strings hung down in front on either side of a lean and very ugly throat; her eyebrows, still brown, were drawn together in such a decided frown that Clifford thought she must be angry, while the poor woman was only so nervously conscious of her plainness and awkwardness, that she longed to run away and hide herself. There was, however, a sour expression on her pale, flabby lips, that indicated a dissatisfaction with the world in general, but which, to a

stranger, seemed to be specially addressed to himself. She said, however, that the gentleman was welcome to come in and see her cottage; and Michael thought her manner of speaking more educated than either her appearance or her way of receiving an expected visitor. Before he left the cottage he had decided that the rooms were thoroughly satisfactory, and that Mrs. Rimell was both honest and kind, though probably not especially easy to live with.

He shrugged his shoulders as this thought came on his way back to the station; he knew that strangers always liked Philip Bryant, his manner was so extremely winning; as for Ruth, well, he had resolved, as far as possible, to banish her from his thoughts, it was therefore useless to assure himself that she was certain to fascinate the sour-looking landlady.

He went home and wrote to Dorothy, and he asked her to answer his letter in Paris; he said he should have left home before she received it.

Then he made out a list of things to be sent to Dolmouth; he copied this list, and sent the duplicate to Ruth with formal, but minute instructions for her journey. He had already put all business relating to Appledore in charge of his friend, John Wood, the only witness of his ill-starred wedding.

There still remained much to be done, but he went on from one thing to another with a determination and a thoroughness that would not allow bodily and mental fatigue a moment's indulgence; at last all was done, and he felt free to start on his journey.

He waited, however, till he heard from Ruth that she and her father were safe at Dolmouth. Her letter was as short and formal as his had been, but it expressed the writer's thanks for the kind care he had taken for her comfort and for that of her father. Michael sighed with relief as he read, a load seemed lifted from his spirits.

"Thank God!" he said, "I am once more free."

BOOK THE SIXTH.

Book the Sixth.

CHAPTER III.

It was ebb-tide. The sea had gone out as far as possible from the semicircle of shingle that made a little bay, and it now lay, as if sulking, in a long, grey, foam-specked roller, over which skimmed at intervals a solitary white gull which sometimes seemed to dip the point of its wing in the water. Behind the sullen grey sea was a mass of clouds, out of which the dark lead-coloured centre bulged forward, seemingly ready to burst over the dull expanse of sand stretched out between the sea and the semicircle of shingled beach; this shelved upwards in three distinct terraces or steps to a wind-swept meadow; over this meadow a sandy path led to the back of Mrs. Rimell's cottage.

The gate of the little garden, set in a

hedge of tamarisk bushes, led on to the meadow, and Ruth could spend as much time as she chose beside the sea without attracting notice by having to pass through the village. The bathing season was over at Dolmouth; at the end of two straggling lines of cottages that constituted the village street, there was a much larger and wider sea-front, where boats were drawn up on the beach, and fishermen in oilskin hats and blue jerseys loafed and chatted in the sunshine.

There was only one set of lodgings in the place besides Ruth's cottage, and these others had been let and vacated early in the season. No fear of an intruder on her favourite haunt disturbed Ruth, as she sat on the lowest of the shelves, her feet resting on the sand that mingled with fine gravel screened by constant friction of the water from the coarse shingle on which she sat. Her rich brown hair was blown out of its sculpturesque waves by the wind which had brought colour to her cheeks, and a yet deeper glow than usual to her sweet

dark eyes ; her mouth, however, looked a trifle harder, it was still beautiful in its firm chiselling, but it looked less ready to curve into a merry smile than it had done in her happy days at Appledore.

The perfect rest of this place and the bracing sea-air had greatly benefited the girl ; at first she had been troubled by her father's constant questions, and had found a difficulty in soothing his uneasiness ; fortunately he had not suspected the truth. The idea that tormented him was that this removal to the sea, as well as the enlargement of the house in Broad Street, were both sacrifices made on his behalf by his too generous friend. Her father's constant praises of her husband, and his congratulations on the treasure she possessed in Michael's love, had been one of Ruth's daily trials. Bryant often asked her when she expected a visit from Michael, but his confirmed optimism had after a time quieted any misgivings about the relations between them.

His returning health and strength helped

him to the conclusion that this delay was the best thing that could have happened with regard to the future happiness both of Michael and Ruth ; it would give them time to get used to one another, and would help his daughter to appreciate the good and lovable qualities of her husband.

He could not, however, understand Michael's absence, or the need of the prolonged journeys which now and again he spoke of when he wrote to his father-in-law. In these brief notes there was usually an enclosure for Ruth, but Bryant did not know that this enclosure simply contained the monthly payment for their expenses, which Michael sent to his wife, with a request for acknowledgment, and an inquiry for her health and her father's.

It was certain that Ruth's health and strength had benefited by the air of Dolmouth, and by the relief from pressing anxiety about her father's illness, but the deepened consciousness of her own wrongdoing, and of her utter dependence on a man to whom she could make no return, had made the girl feel much older.

As she now sat, her eyes sometimes brown, sometimes a greenish grey, according to the light that fell on them, fixed on the far-off sullen sea, she looked very lovely, but her expression had changed; the unexpected mobility of her face had been one of its charms; sweet and kind thoughts still glistened in her liquid eyes, and at times curved her lovely lips in a passing smile, at times, too, the reflection of deeper, sadder feelings flitted over her face, as the shadow of a passing cloud falls on a bright landscape, but the brilliant saucy glances that once made her sweet face so bewitching, so irresistibly fascinating, had gone, seemingly for ever. Her movements, even, were slower than they used to be, she had told her father only this morning that she had suddenly become ten years older.

Sometimes, when Bryant asked her how soon she expected a letter from Michael, her short answers roused his curiosity, and she found it so difficult to avoid a falsehood that she was glad to escape as

soon as she could to her favourite haunt, the little lonely bay.

Ruth loved to come here at ebb-tide ; she had sat on the shingle this afternoon watching the dull, sad-coloured water, and listening to its ever lessening moan ; watching the dip of the sea-gull's wing till the dreary monotony soothed the irritation which some words of her father's had caused.

He had been telling her how he longed for a grandchild, another little Ruth, "the picture of yourself, though there can never be again such another little maid as you were, darling," he had added.

While he spoke the blood flew to Ruth's pearl-white skin in angry protest, dyeing the fair face and showing even on her temples and among her hair. She snatched her hat and went out.

She had sat here a long while till she had, little by little, gained calm in gazing over the sea ; it was so infinite, her own feelings showed themselves weak and puny in the face of this mighty overmastering

power; then after a while, her thoughts went on to the eternal law which bade this ebb and flow be ceaseless; the sea obeyed the law of its being, what was she, then, that she should make her life a continued struggle against the fate that had married her to Michael Clifford? She started at a touch on her shoulder.

A little boy stood beside her, a delicately made child of about four years old; his cheeks were rosy, and his sunny hair veiled bright dark eyes, but the hand he had put on Ruth's shoulder was too tiny and fragile for childish health, and the little legs that showed above his black socks were too slender, though from the smallness of the bones they did not look skinny; there was, too, a wistful restlessness about him as he peered at Ruth over her shoulder.

"I say," he exclaimed, "what a time you have sat here quite still, doing nothing! Nurse saw you when I came out for my walk, she saw you across the meadow; I wanted to come to you, but

nurse scolded ; she said, ‘ You must not trouble the lady.’ Do I trouble you, dear ? ”

The pathetic ring in the thin, cracked voice went to Ruth’s heart ; she slid her arm round the little fellow, drew him close to her, and kissed him over and over again.

“ You never trouble me, darling ; you are my dear little comfort.”

He wriggled himself out of her arms so that he could see her face : he gently put his fingers on her cheek.

“ Comfort ! ” he said, wonderingly. “ You doesn’t want comfort, you’s well, and you doesn’t have to wear black frocks.”

A cloud came over the bright, eager little face, as he looked at his black clothes. Ruth knew that the child wore mourning for his mother, and that his father, the rector of the little parish, had been away for some months from ill-health.

She bent forward and tenderly kissed him.

“ I shall call you my sunshine,” she said.
“ You are such a dear happy little fellow.”

He danced about, and then began to speak so eagerly, that the words came tumbling out one on top of the other, so that he stammered a little in getting them in order.

“I—I’s not twite happy; when papa comes home, then I’ll be happy.”

“You have your uncle,” Ruth said.

He danced away from her again, holding on his hat with his tiny hand, for the wind was rising. Presently he came back and stood in front of her.

“Did you mean Uncle Peter?” He gave an incredulous look, screwed his small mouth and began to whistle. “I say, dear,” he put his hand on Ruth’s shoulder, “don’t tell nurse, you know, acos *she* says he’s the best uncle a little boy ever had; but *I* think Uncle Peter’s only a dunce.”

Ruth laughed; she knew the Reverend Peter Mould had in his earlier days taken a double first at Oxford, and that he was still a fellow of one of its most distinguished colleges; she had heard from Mrs. Rimell that he was too shy and re-

served to be expected to call on any one, but that the curate supplied this omission with regard to the poor people.

“A dunce! Is he? I wonder what you mean by a dunce, Watty? Am I a dunce?”

“You!” He gave her a vehement hug, and stood leaning against her shoulder. “I should just say you wasn’t a dunce; why, you knows everything, I ’spect, just like papa does. You knows how to pet and kiss me,” he gave her a tender little squeeze, “and you knows ’musing stories; I love stories, I do. Why, I b’lieve if we was indoors, you could do ‘ride a cock-horse,’ and ‘going to market,’ as well as papa doos.”

“Oh, yes,” said Ruth laughing, “and I can do ‘Margery Daw,’ can’t I?”

Watty looked aggrieved.

“Look here,” he said, “I’ll tell you why Uncle Peter’s a dunce: last night, I wanted him to do ‘this little pig went to market,’ and he just looks up from his book, and pushes up his speck’les, and stares

—so.” The little mimic’s face expressed such utter bewilderment, that Ruth could not help laughing. “Well, he did look so,” the child went on gravely, “and he said he didn’t know much about pigs, but he would like to teach me to read for myself.”

Watty made such a wry face, that Ruth said, “That was very kind of your uncle.”

Her little friend stood upright and looked suspiciously at her.

“I want to do what papa says,” he answered, after a minute’s thought; “I heard him tell the schoolmistress I was to wait to read till I was five.”

“But it will be nice for you to be able to read, dear,” Ruth smiled at her little friend, who was looking into her eyes as if he meant to read her thoughts. “I—”

“I don’t know,” he said; “you’re going to be my wife, you said ‘Yes’ when I asked you; well, then, you can read beautiful, can’t you? A husband and a wife needn’t both read, you know.”

He looked triumphant, and darting away from her on to the wet sand, he

came back with a spray of red seaweed, and held it out to her.

“But, Watty,” she said, when she had kissed him for his present, “I might be ill, like your father, and then I should want you to read to me.”

He looked perplexed, and stood lost in thought, then he burst out eagerly, “I know, I’ll tell you what, don’t never be ill, that’ll be the best way.”

He put his arm round her neck, and she fondled the little delicate hand and kissed the child’s warm, flushed cheeks.

“You are a darling,” she said, “you must come and see my father one of these days ; ask your uncle if you may come.”

“Why, of course I may ; why didn’t you ask me sooner ? You live in a cottage, so you must be a villager ; I may always go and see villagers.”

He flushed when he saw that she was laughing.

“I doesn’t mean you’s the same as the other villagers ; you’s a lady, and of course your papa is a gentleman ; but you must be

villagers if you live in the village, mustn't you ? ”

Ruth did not answer ; she sat wondering whether she and her father should live on for years in this quiet, lonely place, buried alive, as it were, from every one they had ever known. She had heard more than once from her aunt and from her cousin Peggy, but she had not answered their letters, which had been forwarded to her from Purley. The girl had often wished to write to Sally Voce, to inquire what was happening at the old place, but she felt too much ashamed of her present position to run the risk of exposing it to Sally ; she knew how inquisitive the woman was, and she might take it into her head to come over, if this opening were given her.

“ Why does you come to this little beach, dear ? ” The small cracked voice roused Ruth from a reverie. “ Why doesn't you go to the big beach round the point ? ” He nodded towards the right end of the bay. “ It's more 'musing there, and you'd see Tom and Joe, they'se always on that beach

when they doesn't go out fishing ; nobody never comes here."

"That's why I like it, darling ; I like to have you and the sea all to myself."

Walter stood thinking, his ready wit for once had failed him. At last he burst out,—

"I say, what does you do when I doesn't come ? Doesn't nobody come and talk to you ? They can get round the point, nurse says, 'cept there's spring tides—why, look—do look—there's a gemper coming round now."

Ruth looked where he pointed.

Coming round the white mass of rock, almost tall enough to be called a cliff, that made one boundary of her little bay, she saw Reginald Bevington.

Her first impulse was to take to flight as a refuge from the intense longing she felt to speak to him, and the joy his mere presence gave her ; but she knew the thought was idle ; before she could possibly reach the meadow he would be beside her. She hesitated a moment as

to whether she should send Watty away or keep him with her, but she did not put much confidence in Mr. Bevington's self-control ; and reflection quickly warned her that the child would certainly tell his nurse all that he heard. She felt sure that Reggy would reproach her for her marriage ; and she knew that she must take care of her own reputation in Dolmouth.

“ We had better go home, dear Watty,” she said ; “ my father will be looking for me, and I expect your nurse is waiting tea for you. Run away home, darling, and ask your uncle if you may come and have tea with us to-morrow.”

Meanwhile, Mr. Bevington was coming very slowly forward, picking his way over the fallen masses of rock that added to the natural barrier at the angle of the semicircle. Watty lingered ; he was anxious to get a nearer view of the new arrival, a strange gentleman being rare at Dolmouth. Ruth abruptly rose, she took the child's tiny hand and led him up to the top of the beach.

“Let me see how fast you can run,” she said; “I will come presently.”

Watty went off at full speed. Seeing this, Reginald Bevington mended his pace, and came directly towards Ruth; she held up her hand in warning, as she stood watching the child, and the young man went down towards the sand and flung himself on the beach.

Watty stopped when he was half-way across the meadow, and looked back; he waved his cap, and when Ruth nodded and kissed her hands, the child started afresh; he was soon a small black speck flying across the green meadow.

Ruth waited till he was out of sight, then she turned and came down the beach towards Mr. Bevington; her heart was throbbing painfully.

His eyes had not left her; he had been studying every line of her figure and the outline of her lovely face, as she stood sideways against the full light looking after the boy.

CHAPTER IV.

REGINALD BEVINGTON, after much struggling, had finally determined that he would avoid Mrs. Clifford; there was no use, he thought, in exposing himself to such a trial. If he had been asked, he could not have said why he was here to-day; a sudden impulse had seized him, he had felt that he must see her, and he had started for Appledore without regard to consequences. It may be that a letter received the day before from Lady Emily had helped to rekindle his passion; she asked him for news of his beautiful friend; he felt that he must go and see Ruth. He had just returned from abroad, and he found Bevington intolerably dull.

He was greatly excited, when he reached Appledore, to learn from John Bird that Mr. Bryant no longer lived there, and that

he was uncertain as to where he had gone ; the wish to find himself once more beside Ruth had become irresistible, and now that he saw her, lovelier, more blooming than ever, he could not realize that there was any barrier between them.

He sprang up from the shingle and came towards her, smiling and holding out his hands.

The girl was surprised, he had expected an angry outburst to begin with ; his smile reassured her, she shook hands with him in silence, and drew her fingers gently from the warm clasp in which he tried to hold them.

“ We may be friends still, I hope ? ” he said.

She smiled faintly ; the pain at her heart was almost more than she could bear. Till she saw him, she had lately been trying to believe that her love for him was dead and buried, as much levelled out of existence by the monotony which had lulled thought to sleep as by her resolution not to wrong Michael by thinking about his rival.

Now she felt lifted off her feet with wild joy at sight of the face she had so dearly loved, the face which blotted out every other memory.

“Are you still angry with me, Ruth?” he went on tenderly. “You must forgive me, indeed you must; surely you will not refuse me your friendship? I only ask for that; surely, even your husband will allow you to see an old friend?”

She flushed so deeply red that he was puzzled; he waited silently for her to speak.

“I have no husband,” she said sadly. “I married Mr. Clifford, and I bear his name, but he is never with me; he will not have me for his wife, even if I wished it, because—because—he knows about you.”

“How can he know?” he said impetuously.

“I told him; it was his right to know.”

He stood looking at her in surprise.

“Why did you tell him? it was so unnecessary, so wounding.”

Ruth stared wonderingly at him.

“I do not understand you.”

“I mean, dear girl, that when you have mixed a little more with the world you will learn the truth of the saying that ‘what the eye does not see the heart does not feel.’ I mean that it is quite unnecessary for a husband or a wife to confide all their friendships to one another. If I had married this spring, I should not have spoken of you to my wife; you know that I did not even tell you I was engaged; besides, our case is special; no marriage can interfere with a true friendship like ours, dear girl.”

He took a step towards her, but Ruth moved away; her words had so increased his love, that he could hardly keep it within bounds, and his face betrayed him.

“You are bound to be kind to me,” he said, in his sweet, low tone; it thrilled through the girl and made her tremble; “and I will tell you why. For your sake, because I would not give up loving you, I have lost my promised wife, and the fortune she was to bring me; I am as

free, dearest, as I was in those happy days at Appledore. You ought at least to make up to me for that loss, sweet one ; besides, this removes your scruples, I am still all your own."

Ruth murmured something, but she did not know what she said ; she had made so sure that she and Reginald Bevington were finally parted, that her surprise at seeing him and her unreadiness mastered her ; there was something, too, stronger than either surprise or unreadiness, something that flushed her face and glowed in her eyes as they met her lover's ; it was all in vain, she felt, that she had turned from the thought of him, that she had tried to believe he meant evil rather than good towards her ; the love she saw in his eyes was fast undoing all her resolutions. She had been allowing her thoughts to drift as they pleased in these weeks of idle dreaming by the sea, and the process had not strengthened her moral tone ; she had wilfully ignored the power of her love, had carelessly glossed it over, instead of

striving with all her strength to uproot it—and now she was powerless, it had its way; as her eyes met Reginald's, he saw that they swam with tenderness.

He came still nearer, and tried to put his arm round her.

She instantly drew back.

“If you have so little respect for me, I must leave you,” she said sadly; “you forget—”

“Pardon me,” he interrupted, “I deserve reproof, but I forget everything but you; you may trust me, my own Ruth; you are mine, you cannot say you have left off loving me.”

She was silent.

“I will be so patient,” he went on, “so very patient; I will do anything you ask, but, dear friend, you will let me come and see you? You own that your husband has deserted you; his marrying you was the trick of the dog in the manger; why did he take you from me if he does not value you? But for him you could be mine absolutely. How do you know, my Ruth, that this

man has not a dearer friend somewhere, whose society he prefers to yours?"

Ruth hung her head with shame; she knew it was her fault that her companion dared to speak in this way of Michael; she need not have told Mr. Bevington her present unhappy position; it flashed upon her that her husband's name might have proved a shield to her, if she had not been so foolishly candid; she reddened with a guilty consciousness that she had made this avowal for Reginald's sake, and for her own, to relieve him from the pain of believing her unfaithful to him.

He misunderstood her silence.

"It is so, then? How dared he come between us? how dared he marry you, my sweet Ruth?"

The words seemed to pierce into her brain, and to let fresh light on her troubled thoughts.

She no longer saw the flushed face of her handsome young lover; she saw in his place, her husband, stern and powerful, as he had looked when he stood towering

over her, and asked her how she had dared to marry him. What a coward she was, knowing all the blame to be duly hers, to let any of it light on Michael!

“No,” she said firmly; “my husband is not capable of such conduct; he loved me dearly, but he has a right to be wounded and angry, for he knows I do not love him.”

Bevington angrily interrupted her.

“Nonsense! As if you were fit to marry such a person! I can understand, my darling, that you married him for your father’s sake, in the same way I was going to marry to please my mother. On the whole, I thank Mr. Clifford for the pattern he has set me; I assure you I am not above following it. I shall never give you up; you are dearer to me than a wife can ever be. Come, dearest, let us go and see your father; I long to shake hands again with the kind old man.”

He had spoken impetuously, carried out of himself by the force of his passion; he had let his words come at will; he caught Ruth’s hand as he ended, and held it so

tightly that she could not draw it away without a struggle.

She was so dazzled and bewildered, that she was even glad to be guided up the steep layers of shingle; but the delight that thrilled through her veins at his touch was a true warning; every beating pulse told her how she still loved her companion, and how urgent it was that she should keep her promise to her husband. She felt that she must send Mr. Bevington away, and the sooner the better, if she meant to keep her word.

She had become listless and aimless while she sat day after day gazing at the sea; she was indeed in a way demoralized; but a few weeks will not undo the teaching of a lifetime, and Ruth's mother had lived long enough to teach her child how to find help to do her duty in this sore strait.

They reached the border of the meadow, and the girl drew her hand swiftly from her companion's grasp, and uttered a brief, unspoken prayer; the words seemed formal and lifeless, but the very effort to seek

stronger help than her own nerved her against her weakness.

She turned to Mr. Bevington.

“You must leave me,” she said, with a decision that surprised him. “I promised that I would not willingly see you, and you must help me to keep my word. You must not try to see me again.”

“I cannot go away, and you must not ask me to make such a promise. I have kept true to you; you confess that your marriage was a sham; why then can we not be friends? See, I do not even ask to kiss your hand; why do you wish to deprive me of the exquisite joy of seeing you and listening to you? It would be such a comfort to tell you my troubles; you forget that you are my only real friend.”

While she stood listening, Ruth's heart pleaded powerfully in his favour; her eyes were fixed on the grass, and mechanically she counted the plantain heads that grew near her feet. Once more the remembrance of her husband's strong, honest

face came to help her ; she had told him she would have nothing to do with Reginald Bevington, how could she then break a promise ? Whatever it might cost her, she was bound to send this dearly-loved friend away from her—to refuse to see him again.

She looked up at last, sad, but determined.

“ Let us say, Good-bye, here,” she said slowly, “ I believe you care for me ; if you do, you must wish me to do right ; it must be wrong for us to meet now.”

“ Why must it be wrong ? ” he asked vehemently, “ just because you have gone through an empty form with a man you do not love, who has deserted you, who will never be anything more to you than a mere acquaintance ? It is only a fancy of duty that possesses you, and it is utterly unreal, a thorough mistake ; you shall not sacrifice our lives to it.” He paused, then he said quietly : “ Be patient, my darling ; take time to think. I will go now, but I will come again and see your father, and then,

dearest Ruth, we will have another talk. Good-bye, sweet friend."

He raised his hat and left her, the more readily because he saw the little boy coming across the field from the cottage, followed by a staid-looking woman.

"It's all right, dear, I may come to tea," the child shouted, but Ruth hurried across the meadow, passing him with a nod, while Mrs. Rimell, who had come out with Watty, and now turned homewards again, kept her eyes keenly fixed on her lodger's flushed face.

The landlady was sorely disturbed ; she had let these lodgings for years past, but her visitors had always been highly respectable ; now as she watched Mrs. Clifford, she told herself that she had always misdoubted her : she was too beautiful to be left alone in this way by a newly married husband, unless there was a reason for it ; and the landlady thought that the handsome, fashionable young man who had just left her was a more than sufficient reason for a husband's jealousy.

Mrs. Rimell had always been poor, but a strong sense of what she called "gentility" had kept her from making acquaintances; she had seen scarcely anything of life or of people; she was, therefore, suspicious, apt to see wrong-doing in anything that differed from her own small sphere of experience, and she was extremely narrow in her judgments. She at once decided that this beautiful Mrs. Clifford was not "what she should be," or what her husband thought she was, and Mrs. Rimell wished she had never come under her roof, though she did pay so regularly. The landlady gave an involuntary sigh, and Ruth turned and looked at her. The keen suspicion in the woman's face alarmed the girl; for a moment she felt tempted to justify herself, and then she saw that explanation was quite uncalled for.

Philip Bryant looked excited when his daughter came in, his lips quivered at the sight of Ruth.

"Who is it, my girl?" he said eagerly.
"Your little friend came in and said there

was a gentleman with you on the beach, and you had stayed with him. Was it Michael, dear ? ”

Ruth felt stunned ; it had not occurred to her that Watty would go in and see her father.

“ That youngster’s a clever little chap,” Bryant went on ; “ he came in to see you with a message from his uncle, and when I said he would find you on the beach, he nodded ; ‘ Is she there still ? ’ he said ; ‘ she was there with a gentleman.’ ”

“ It was not Michael,” Ruth said slowly ; “ it was Mr. Bevington ; he wants to call and see you.”

Bryant smiled with pleasure.

“ I take that to be exceedingly kind of Mr. Bevington,” he said ; “ I shall be very glad to see him, but he always was a perfect gentleman, Ruth, not one of your make-believes ; he was as free with his money as he was pleasant ; I’m sure I shall be right down glad to see him. Did you ask him to supper, my girl ? ”

Ruth laughed in a hard, forced way ; it struck her as bitterly grotesque, this notion of asking her lover to sup under the roof which her husband had provided for her.

“ I am not sure whether he will call to-day or to-morrow ; ” then in a firmer tone, “ but, father, we could not ask Mr. Bevington to sup with us ; Michael would not like it.”

Her father leaned back in his chair, and stared at her with an amused expression in his still handsome brown eyes.

“ My dear girl,” he said, deprecatingly, “ isn’t that absurd ? Why should Michael object ? You women takes trange fads into your heads, even a good woman like you, Ruth.”

She shivered, and shrank into herself.

“ Don’t call me good, father, please don’t—I—” She checked herself ; since his illness she dared not speak about anything to her father that might trouble him when he was left alone.

“ Well, my girl,” he said fondly, “ if

you're not good, I'd like to see a better. What I meant was that Michael could not object, because he was always partial to the young gentleman ; besides that, do you suppose, child, that you can do wrong in Michael's eyes ? ”

“ I'll go and take off my hat,” she answered in a jerky voice.

Her father looked at her in surprise, she so rarely spoke abruptly to him.

Ruth hurried at once to her bedroom ; she so longed for sympathy and help, that she had nearly told him in how sore a strait she found herself.

“ Oh, mother, mother ! why are you not here to help me ? ”

She stood in her room, her hands clasped round the post of the old-fashioned bedstead, her head pressed against it, and then with the longing for her mother came a vivid remembrance of her mother's teaching ; the unhappy girl became conscious that she was not left alone, she seemed to know that there was help for her, if she would only seek it ; she stood

with bent head and clasped hands, while every instant the conviction took more complete possession of her will; then slowly, reverently, she knelt down and prayed with all her heart and soul that God would save her from herself and from her sinful love.

CHAPTER V.

RUTH had never been to school, and she had read few novels ; she had not had one intimate girl friend except Peggy Whishaw, nor was she a dreamer ; she may have been helped by the masculine tone of her education, but certainly she had not spent her girlhood in thinking, as so many girls do, about a possible husband. She had led such a healthy, happy life, that she had no tendency to morbid ideas ; she had thought of love and of marriage in a healthy, natural fashion, as facts that would probably come into her life.

It was doubtless this absence of self-consciousness that had at first made her so blind to the nature of her own feelings for Reginald Bevington ; his singular charm of manner, the complete contrast

he afforded to anyone she had ever known, had, at first sight, fascinated the fresh, simple-natured girl. Before she saw Mr. Bevington, when she sometimes thought of a husband, Ruth had decided that she must marry a man of strong character; she knew her own tendency to self-will, and she longed for a guide; she had mourned her grandfather almost as much for the real loss she experienced in his self-reliance and his ability to advise, as from the affection she had for him.

Her devoted love for her father had never allowed her to become fully aware of his weakness of character; when of late, circumstances had forced it on her notice, she reminded herself that he had told her, her mother was the first good influence that had come into his life; Ruth always shrank from judging others, and she also troubled herself very little as to what others might think of her.

She had looked up to Reginald Bevington; his outward superiority had so impressed her, that, in the generous faith of

her nature, she had taken for granted that this superiority was thorough ; she had hoped he would help her father by his advice. His request for secrecy before he left Appledore had disturbed her faith in him, but she reflected that he had his own parents to study, and he did not, she told herself, know her father as well as she did ; he could not therefore be expected to put full trust in Philip Bryant's silence.

It seemed to her now, as she prepared to rejoin her father, that she had not done Mr. Bevington justice in this last meeting ; he had been excited at meeting her, and had said things which his sober judgment would condemn ; he had also said he meant to keep within the lines of friendship. She felt she had been cowardly ; instead of asking him to leave her, as if she were afraid of herself, she ought to have asked his advice, and relied on his friendship to help her. When they parted, she had determined not to see him again, but now she felt braver ; they must meet once more, she decided, and they must resolve

to help one another in bearing the trial that had been sent them.

“If we both try in earnest, we shall be helped,” she said to herself.

She went downstairs to her father in a wrought-up mood, feeling happier than she had felt in her weeks of aimless dreaming.

Philip Bryant kept expecting his promised visitor, he talked incessantly of him in a half childish way. But Mr. Bevington did not come to the cottage. His scruples with regard to Ruth had vanished since he had learned her husband's desertion; the sight of her, the love he had read in her eyes, had fired him with determination to win her; Lady Emily would not have believed her young cousin capable of the prompt energy he showed. He found on inquiry that he could get to Munby, the nearest market town, by train, and he decided to go over and sleep there. He had seen for himself that Ruth was unhappy, and she was neglected by her husband; he felt that he could never change towards

her, she would always be the one love of his life ; he was convinced that he could make her happy, it must therefore be his duty to do so.

His idea was to take her away with him the next day ; he could give her and her father a better home than the Dolmouth cottage, and he persuaded himself that Ruth would consent to go with him if she had her father to live with her. Mr. Bevington meant to see Bryant next morning ; it was quite possible, he thought, that the farmer might be brought to second his views, if he did not make his real motive too apparent at starting. Reginald had a clear recollection of Mr. Bryant's willingness to drift and let things come as they would ; surely he could, little by little, induce him to see that his daughter's present mode of life was cruel to her, and also unreasonable, and that doubtless the husband would be glad to get rid of her. Bevington shut his eyes as to the future ; if it obtruded on his notice, he told himself that he should never leave off loving Ruth, how could he ? He did not

believe now he had seen her again, that there was such another woman.

He found a quiet lodging in Munby, which he thought would do for Bryant until he wished him to join his daughter ; he meant to go abroad with Ruth so as to avoid all gossip ; having made next morning his arrangements to this effect, he took the train back to Dolmouth.

Mrs. Rimell's gentility had made her averse from visiting her neighbours, but she had one chum in Dolmouth, Miss Tabitha Stamper, who kept the post-office, and sold photographs, stationery, and sundry other articles. Ruth's landlady had told her friend a good deal in favour of Mr. Bryant ; his good looks, his winning manner, and his lameness had made the shy woman devoted to him, but though she sang his praises to her friend, in Miss Tabitha's sanctum behind the shop, she rarely praised Mrs. Clifford. Mrs. Rimell considered her lady lodger unnecessarily beautiful, she was very pleasant, but she was not "a patch on her father," she was unsociable, and silent ; she

had not once, even on her first arrival, asked Mrs. Rimell to take a walk with her, or to tell her about the place.

Mrs. Clifford rarely wrote a letter, very seldom sewed, and she did not often read, her chief delight indoors was to sit at the pianoforte, which her husband had hired from Munby, and sing till Mrs. Rimell, who disliked music, wondered her lodger's throat could stand such a strain. Of late Mrs. Clifford was seldom indoors, she either sat with her father in the garden, or on that lonely strip of beach, or else took long walks quite by herself. This was all that could be told about the lodger, and Mrs. Rimell did not simply tell out these facts, she let them fall in the way of hints from her pale, flabby lips, when her friend Tabitha tried her patience by recounting the effect which Ruth's appearance in church had created on Miss Stamper's nephew, the owner of the allshop of Dolmouth, and on his single fellow-townsmen.

“My dear,” the post-mistress whispered,

“they’re all as wild as coney about her; if you’ll believe me, that schoolmaster has been heard to say your lodger’s ‘as beautiful as an angel,’ not at all a proper expression for a married man with a family, my dear, to use in speaking of another man’s wife.”

Yesterday evening Miss Stamper had been told of Mrs. Clifford’s interview with a strange gentleman on the beach, and both the cronies had gravely shaken their heads, and had wondered what husbands could expect who left giddy young wives to take care of themselves.

“Serve them right, I say,” said Miss Tabitha.

It was, therefore, natural that when next day Mrs. Rimell threw open her lodger’s parlour door, and announced “A gentleman to see you, sir,” she looked grimmer than ever; Ruth happening to glance at her, was surprised at her spiteful expression.

Reginald Bevington went up to his old friend and shook hands; his greeting was affectionate and yet full of tact, it seemed for the moment to Ruth as if the old days

at Appledore had come back. The young fellow was evidently delighted to see his old friend; but except for the extreme gentleness of his manner, there was nothing to indicate consciousness of the great change he saw in Philip Bryant.

He then turned to Ruth, greeting her in an easy friendly manner, without any of the glow of pleasure that had sparkled in his eyes at sight of her father.

The girl smiled. "He is all I fancied he was," she thought; "he knows how hard it is for me to see him, and he will not make it harder for me than I can bear."

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Bevington," Philip Bryant said, in his genial way, "but you should have come earlier, we could have given you some lunch."

"Thank you, I am staying in Munby, I only came out to see you. I want you to come and pay me a visit there; you will come, you and your daughter; won't you, Mr. Bryant?"

Bryant looked delighted; a genial smile spread over his face, but Bevington saw that he looked appealingly at Ruth.

“It is very kind of you,” he said, “we shall enjoy a little change, shan’t we, Ruth? This is rather a dull place.”

Ruth was looking very grave, this proposal made her suddenly nervous, but she had determined that her father should not guess the truth about Reginald; such a revelation might, she thought, bring on a fresh seizure.

“You are still too weak, dear, to go so far,” she said, affectionately, then she looked directly at Mr. Bevington, and forced herself to speak as if the subject were completely indifferent to her.

“My dear father looks so much stronger than he is, you would not guess how sadly even a short railway journey would try him : he could not possibly go to Munby.”

Bevington looked reproachfully at her, and her eyes fell under his. Her opposition only served to inflame him, it made him even more determined.

“I assure you the change will do wonders for him ; but, my dear Mrs. Clifford, every precaution against fatigue shall be taken. I have ascertained that an invalid carriage

can be had, so that Mr. Bryant can lie on a sofa all the way ; there will really be no fatigue whatever."

Ruth felt desperate, she could not keep up her show of indifference ; her eyebrows contracted, and the square corners of her expressive mouth were strangely hard and set.

Her father had been watching her with surprise ; he all at once remembered what she had said about her husband.

"You leave it to me, Mr. Bevington," he said, with his bright smile, "I'll talk it over with Ruth, and I'll let you know when to expect us, as you are kind enough to wish us to come."

Bevington was earnestly wishing that Ruth would leave the room ; he recognized that a great mental change had passed over her father ; to this ardent young fellow full of life and animal vigour, the poor, still figure in the easy chair, seemed helpless alike in mind and body ; it would depend, Reginald thought, whether he or Ruth had the stronger power over the

invalid, and as Ruth in heart was on his side, if he could only get Bryant to himself for a few minutes, her scruples, he told himself, would have to give way. He glanced at her as she sat near her father; she looked utterly unyielding, and he decided to wait. He would come over again and see Bryant alone, and then, as he remembered how dutiful Ruth had always been, he told himself he would get a thorough hold over her father, and oblige her to give up her opposition.

“It is not real,” he said to himself, “the sweet darling longs to come to me, but she is afraid.”

To Ruth’s surprise he did not repeat his invitation; after a few more words with Bryant about Appledore Farm and its present tenant, Mr. Bevington took his leave; his manner to the girl at parting was as his greeting had been, friendly but indifferent.

As soon as the visitor had left them, Bryant looked gravely at his daughter.

“Why do you grudge me a little

change?" he said, in the pathetic tone which he knew had power to move her, "why won't you let me go to Munby? I should like it ever so, I enjoy talking to Bevington; I am quite well now, you know I am."

Ruth stood thinking; her difficulties were thickening. She had always believed that she had hastened her father's second seizure by her confession to him on the eve of her marriage; she believed that his memory had been affected by this last illness, for he often spoke to her of Michael as if he were ignorant that she cared for some one else; his manner to Mr. Bevington to-day had shown her that he did not in any way suspect the relations between them, it was, she told herself, essential for her father's sake that he should never learn the truth.

"I did not know you wished for change, dear," she said, lovingly, "I am only thinking of Michael; it is not my fancy, indeed it is not; the last time he came to Appledore, he spoke very harshly of Mr.

Bevington, and I promised him I would not willingly see this gentleman again. Do you not think that Michael would have a right to be angry if we were to accept Mr. Bevington's hospitality?"

Bryant looked disappointed.

"That's all very well," he said in a fretful tone, "but I hardly think Michael meant to come between me and my friend; you must excuse me if I say you are inconsistent; if Michael told you this, how was it you stayed talking on the beach alone with this gentleman?"

He was looking at her inquisitively, and the girl shivered at the danger before her. She waited to collect her thoughts before she answered.

"I was telling Mr. Bevington what I had promised; I let him know that my husband does not like him."

Bryant's face flushed with vexation.

"That was extremely imprudent, and unnecessary; you are wise for a woman Ruth, but still you are only a woman, and you are impulsive; no man would have said

such a thing. I am sure it was very good-natured of the young fellow to come and see me after such an insult ; I'll tell you what it is, my dear, I don't want to hurt you, and I know there's no use in meddling between man and wife, but there's something about Michael's behaviour to you that doesn't satisfy me ; I know he sacrificed himself on my account, the doctor told me as much when he came to see us off, but what I don't understand is his continued absence ; he must come now and again to Purley, well, then, why don't he run over to see you ? ”

Ruth put her hand over her face, and he thought she was crying.

“ There, there, dear child,” he said, “ forgive me, try and forget what I've said ; I know you feel as I do, that after what Michael's done for me, I ought not to say a word against him, or dispute his wishes. Well, I wcn't say any more ; kiss me, darling, and you shall help me write a letter to Mr. Bevington. I'll decline very civilly, but I'll let him see that we can't accept his kindness.”

CHAPTER VI.

PHILIP BRYANT was right when he said that Michael Clifford must sometimes go back to Purley ; he did not know that on these occasions Michael contrived to make his stay as short as possible.

His anger against Ruth had subsided, he had not been able to sustain it, and he so ardently longed for an excuse to present himself at the cottage, that he was afraid to remain in Purley, lest he might be tempted against his better judgment to visit Dolmouth. He knew that his best hope of reconciliation lay in avoiding Ruth till she should make the first advance. He could not now go back to his idea of trying, little by little, to win his wife's love ; their last meeting had made that hope impossible. But he would not, now, take

Ruth as his wife, till he had proof that she no longer loved this other man : he told himself angrily when the memory came, that she ought never to have thought of Reginald Bevington as a lover.

Clifford's own love, however, was Ruth's best advocate on this point, he could judge her feelings by his own ; he knew that he ought not to have allowed himself to care for her as he did, but when he tried to think this out, and go back to the beginning, he could not find a clue to guide him ; he could not possibly fix a time when he had not loved the girl ; it seemed to him that he had always thought of her in one way, and had longed to have her for his wife. His love seemed to go back to her very young days, when she was still studying with her grandfather, and when Michael had only had occasional glimpses of her, and had dreamed out a possible future, as he rode back to Purley.

Only one fact stood out clearly revealed to him as he thought of his disastrous marriage : if Ruth could not bring herself

to love him, his life was irretrievably marred : he knew that he could not think of any other woman, even if it were possible to free himself from Ruth ; she had even come between him and Dorothy, for he could not forget his sister's just and well-founded warning, or the jar it had caused between them.

He had invited himself to spend Christmas with his brother in Scotland, and he was now on his way there ; he hoped to persuade Dorothy to come and stay with him at Purley, as soon as his house was ready. At present the bricklayers were idle, there had been a hard frost for a fortnight, and this seemed likely to continue ; if the weather should change before the end of January, the builder assured Mr. Clifford the house could be ready for occupation by March. Clifford longed to be at home again, and yet he was now asking himself what excuse he should make, when the house was ready to receive her, for his wife's continued absence ?

It was a relief from this thought to

reach the end of his journey. Late as it was, he rejoiced to see that his brother lived out of the little town of Dalgarno ; there was glimmer enough left to show him when he reached it, that the square house stood in its own grounds and in the country.

The sight of Dorothy was very cheering, she looked stronger and healthier than he had ever seen her, and he was rejoiced to meet his tall, bronzed brother, whom he had not seen for more than a year.

At breakfast next morning, he was introduced to his two nieces, Maggie and Lucy ; since he had seen them, they had passed from children into a couple of fair-skinned, dark-eyed girls ; they reminded him of their fair, sweet, Scotch mother, they had her yellow hair and her soft kind voice, and their father's dark eyes, and tall erect figure. It pleased Michael to see how devoted they were to "Aunt Dorothy," and he was surprised to note the change which increased responsibilities had worked in Dorothy ; she was twice as brisk, more

like the thoughtful mother of a family, than the petted invalid she had been at Purley.

“You are stronger, are you not?” he said to her.

“I hope so,” she answered; “but do you know, I begin to think I might have done a good deal more than I did at Purley, if you had not spoiled me and made me fanciful; you see, I had grown to think your notion correct, when you said I was not strong enough to be useful, I never tried to find out for myself how much I really could do; I simply indulged myself at your expense.”

It was delightful to Michael after his long isolation from family ties to find himself once more with those who loved him; it was especially delightful to be again with Dorothy, but he shrank from her questions, and for a day or two he avoided any opportunity of finding himself alone with his sister.

Dorothy had divined this avoidance, she also shrank from a talk which must necessarily turn on her brother's marriage;

hitherto she had only inquired for his wife, and for Mr. Bryant.

At last the chance came ; David Clifford took his daughters into Edinburgh to see an old friend of their mother's, and Michael said he should stay at home with Dorothy, and take a walk with her on the moor. In front of the house was a view of the river backed by fields, but behind it a wide-spreading moor stretched up, heather covered, to the pine-crowned hill. The sun was shining brightly, and Dorothy's pale cheeks glowed with the keen bleak air, and exercise, as she led the way across the moor.

"I wish you could have seen this heather in early autumn," she said, "it was such a glorious purple against the blue-green of the pines ; those brown masses of faded blossom show you what it has been ; higher up the heather grows so deep, that when I played 'hide-and-seek' with Maggie and Lucy they could not find me ; I only had to sit down and the ling bushes completely hid me."

Dorothy's game at "hide-and-seek" amused Michael.

"I'm afraid Purley will seem very slow and dull after Dalgarno," he said, "and yet, dear, I want you to come to me for a while, when the house is free of work-people."

Dorothy looked up at him, and she saw that he was smiling as he waited for her answer.

"But you will not want me then," she said, "you will have your wife."

He did not look vexed, he seemed to have his answer ready.

"I hardly think so; Dr. Buchan told me that Mr. Bryant has a very weak heart, he does not think he can live long, I doubt if he could bear the fatigue of another move. Buchan considers that a fresh seizure would carry him off; he says the pure air and the quiet of a place like Dolmouth are more likely to prolong my old friend's life, than a market-town which, occasionally, has some stir and bustle in it. Don't you think, apart from the risk of the journey,

that it would be really selfish to ask my wife to bring her father to live in Purley?"

"I always told you, you were a Sir Galahad, Michael," she said impetuously, "you are too good in this case; I only wonder how your wife can bear to stay away from you, I suppose she is very good too."

She felt that her lip was curling, and she also felt that she was on very tender ground; she suddenly stooped to gather a tuft of moss, which lay gleaming, a brilliant tender green, at the bottom of a little heath-pool thawed by the warm sunshine; she did not see her brother suddenly redden under his stern mask of self-control.

"My wife is extremely unselfish, Dorothy; I can't bear to think what the loss of her father will be to her."

Dorothy felt irritable; it was natural, she thought, that Ruth should be fond of her father, and the devoted sister had been trying ever since her brother's marriage to

accept Michael's very singular arrangements in the light in which he showed them, but in Dorothy's opinion a woman's love for her husband ought to exceed any mere family affection, especially when Michael was the husband in question.

She gave him a cheering smile.

"Ruth will grieve a good deal, my dear boy, but she will get over it: time is a wonderful healer, no doubt she will resign herself to God's will; you will go to her at once when it happens, will you not? and you will certainly be able to comfort her."

"I hope so."

He turned from the subject and began to tell Dorothy about his last foreign journey; he had come home through Germany, and he had met with some amusing experiences in his endeavours to make himself understood in an out-of-the-way place; he made his sister laugh till she quite forgot her discontent about Ruth.

"If she only knew the truth," Michael said to himself as they went back to the

house, "if she could only guess it, how angry my little Dorothy would be."

He told himself she should never learn this terrible truth; no one should ever know how Ruth had deceived him; he meant that part of their lives to be a buried memory between him and his wife.

His visit to Dalgarno soon began to tell on his spirits; he was becoming hopeful; the rest from incessant work, the freshness of his surroundings, and the delight of being with those of whose affection he felt sure, helped to soothe the heart-wound he had received on his last visit to Appledore. He took walks with his brother, he skated with his nieces, who were extremely elated by their uncle's companionship, but at the end of a week his restlessness had returned.

One morning at breakfast he told his brother and Dorothy that he was due next day in Norfolk.

"If my house is ready," he said to David, "you will spare Dorothy to me at Easter? and why should you not come

too, David, for a few days, you and the girls ? ”

So it was settled, and Michael announced his intention of travelling by the night express to his destination ; he said he had taken a most unusual holiday, and that he must make up for it by saving as many hours as possible.

“ You will not have started before I come home,” David said. “ I shall bring in the second post, and who knows but that I may bring in something to change your mind.”

Michael smiled ; he had promised to take his nieces to play golf some distance off, and the expedition would consume the best part of the day, as they were to lunch at a friend’s house.

Dorothy walked part of the way with them, and came home rather sadly by herself. She smiled, however, as she thought of Michael’s wish that she should go back to Broad Street ; she determined, if he did not forbid it, that she would go over from Purley to Dolmouth

and make acquaintance with Ruth, it would humanize the relations between them, for Ruth's answer to Dorothy's letter on her marriage had been so formal that it was evident she did not wish for a correspondence with her new sister ; and, also, the astute Dorothy promised herself to discover whether Ruth could not be persuaded to give up her devoted watch over her father for a few weeks and devote herself to her husband.

“ We might change places ; I am much better fitted to take care of Mr. Bryant now, than I was when he came to Purley,” she said, rejoicing in her new stock of health.

The golfing party did not reach home long before David did ; the girls full of excitement and delight gathered round their father buzzing out all they had to tell, especially to recount Uncle Michael's exploits ; while their uncle was busy with the contents of a packet of letters brought in for him by his brother.

Dorothy sat watching Michael, and she

saw that he kept one letter in his hand while he read the others. She guessed that the reserved letter was from his wife, and when he left the room she felt sure that he had gone to enjoy his reading in private.

The others went away, but Dorothy sat waiting till Michael came back. She saw as he entered that his face was full of suffering; he came up to her.

“Something very sad has happened, dear, my friend has gone, Ruth has lost her father; it is a dreadful business.”

Dorothy stared at him in wonder, he seemed unhinged, utterly cast down, and yet only the other day he had himself said that Mr. Bryant had not long to live. She pulled herself together and tried to think of Ruth and her sorrow.

“Poor girl,” she said tenderly, “you will go to her at once, won’t you, Michael?”

His face hardened as she looked at him.

“I cannot go to her,” he said abruptly, “I am due at Norwich to-morrow; two

hard-worked business men are coming to meet me there the day after to-morrow, I cannot break the appointment. And there is something else of a pressing nature; I am asked by a man, who has always been one of my best friends, to go with him to look at some land considerably south of Vienna; we have to start in three days. I do not see how I can go to Ruth."

Dorothy was looking at him in utter surprise.

"But, Michael, what is all this compared with Ruth? you surely must go to your wife, how can she manage all alone? There will be the funeral, you know?"

"That will be over by now; she did not write directly, and the letter has been delayed by going first to Purley, I suppose she thought I had returned; I had not told her I had lengthened my visit here."

He paused, and began to walk up and down the room. Presently he came back to his sister.

"I want you to do something for me, Dorothy, I want you to go to Ruth."

Dorothy felt in a mist, she began to think that Michael and his wife had certainly quarrelled; she had thought it strange he had not spent Christmas at Dolmouth; and yet even if there had been a coolness between them, surely Ruth's present sorrow ought to heal any cause of disagreement.

"I will go, dear, if you wish it," she said, slowly, "and I will do all I can, but I cannot be of much use in comforting a person I have never seen."

"I know you better than you know yourself," he answered, "you will be able to help and comfort Ruth; you knew her father and you liked him, and I am sure she longs for sympathy, though she says she wishes to be alone. If you can be ready to start in two days' time, I shall be thankful; I will write and tell her to expect you; she must not be left alone, even though she wishes it."

"Of course not." Dorothy hesitated; she looked up at her brother's saddened face. "I know I ought not to interfere," she felt almost too nervous to get her

words out; "but, Michael, dear, if you could only go to her for a day, just to explain your plans, it would be so much better in every way."

Dorothy could not understand her brother's conduct, he was, perhaps, vexed that his wife had not summoned him at once, but she told herself that probably the poor thing had been stupefied with her sorrow. "I daresay it was all very sudden," she added, softly. "What does she say?"

"Ruth does not enter into detail, she only says there was another seizure, and there was no return of consciousness; that she called in the Dolmouth doctor, and he told her it would be useless to summon Buchan; all was over before Buchan could have reached Dolmouth; the rector there seems to have been very kind." He paused. "Once for all, it is impossible for me to go to her; if you will take my place it will be a great relief to me to know you are with her."

"I will go whenever you like, Michael."

He had decided to put off his own start

till to-morrow, and he now sat down beside Dorothy, and planned out her journey with his usual rapid precision. He told her that he should probably be absent two months, and that when he returned to Purley, if the house was still unfinished, he should join her and Ruth at Dolmouth.

During the evening he was unusually silent; his loving sister felt convinced that there was some mystery between Michael and his wife which he did not care to explain.

Meanwhile Michael was in a strange state of alternate hope and depression; he wondered what Dorothy would have thought if he had shown her his wife's letter. At night, when he went to his room, he read it through again.

Ruth began by telling him that her father had died three days before; she told this simply, but with a sadness that brought tears to her husband's eyes. She said the rector of the place had been very kind to her, and had helped her in making arrangements for the funeral. "I am sure," the

letter went on, "your first feeling will be to come to me in my trouble; I entreat you not to do this. I could not bear it. Please leave me to myself, I owe you too much already, and I do not wish to add any more unreturned kindness to the debt. No, Michael, it is not only that, I must tell you the whole truth; I am trying to be real, and to look at my future life as it must be; by God's help I hope in the end to do my duty to you, whether you forgive me or not. But do not let us meet too soon; let things take their course; if we force ourselves to be friends, if we meet now, it may only make our future, whatever that may be, more difficult. Do not come to Dolmouth; but now that I am left quite alone, if you will sometimes write to me, I shall be thankful to get your letters."

Michael felt less hopeful when he had read the letter again.

"Women are governed by their feelings," he said to himself, "her father's death has made her penitent and emotional; she, perhaps, feels that she has un-

settled and spoiled my life ; if she were really sorry, she would be ready to give some proof of it, she would have written at once and she would have asked me to go to her."

He grieved for the loss of his old friend, and for Ruth's trial ; but the sore, ill-used feeling came back, he could not bring himself to forgive his wife's persistent avoidance of him, or to feel as kindly towards her as he had been feeling before her letter reached him.

BOOK THE SEVENTH.

Book the Seventh.

CHAPTER VII.

RUTH stood on the platform of the little railway station waiting for her sister-in-law. When Dorothy stepped out of the train, the two women looked at one another for a moment, before they exchanged greetings; the little sister had never fully believed in Michael's description of Ruth's beauty, she had expected to meet a far more ordinary girl. When, therefore, she saw this lovely, stately creature, whose deep mourning made her look far paler, and even more distinguished than usual, Dorothy was greatly impressed; she had made up her mind that Michael, like most men deeply in love, had gifted the girl with all sorts of mental attributes to match her beauty. At once, in spite of all former prejudice, Dorothy's liking was

caught by the external charm of her brother's wife. It had been evident to the keen-witted spinster from the adoring way in which Ruth's father had spoken of his daughter, that Miss Bryant had been a spoiled child : now her quiet dignity, and repose of manner, as she stood alone on the platform, surprised Dorothy, because these attributes were completely unexpected ; she felt at once the superiority of this beautiful woman, and was more than ever mystified at the strangeness of the relations that existed between Michael and his wife.

Dorothy looked affectionately at her new sister, and Ruth, who had not expected to like her, was pleased and touched by her kindly greeting. As they walked along together, Dorothy began to speak tenderly and regretfully of Philip Bryant, and Ruth's aching heart opened at once to her. When they reached the cottage, and she had placed her visitor on a sofa in the parlour, she bent over Dorothy and kissed her.

"It was very good of you to come," she said, "I am very glad to see you."

“Thank you,” Dorothy answered simply, she instinctively felt that her brother’s wife would not have made this advance, unless she wished that they should be friends.

They talked at first of Dorothy’s journey, and then of Michael’s movements; the devoted sister was inclined to resent Ruth’s ignorance on the subject of her husband’s projected journey; it seemed to Dorothy that Michael must have mentioned it when he wrote, and that his wife did not take sufficient interest in him and his affairs to remember. Then, as she looked into the girl’s sweet, sad eyes, she remembered how recent her sorrow was, and how much allowance should be made for her.

The proof that Michael understood both his wife and his sister was, that when Ruth that night had taken an affectionate leave of her visitor, she wondered how she had been able to bear the intense loneliness of the last few days. She recognized in Dorothy a sympathetic, yet steadfast nature, to which she could cling for help in her sorrow; and she looked forward to a rest-

ful time with her. Ruth had longed to send for her aunt, but the feeling of her utter dependence on Michael had checked this wish. Now it seemed to her that Miss Clifford was a safer companion than any one else could be; even if she did suspect that something was wrong between husband and wife, she was Michael's sister, and for his sake would be discreet; she certainly would not be inclined, as Ruth's aunt might have been, to consider Michael a negligent husband.

After breakfast they went down together to the little bay. Dorothy was charmed with the delicious air, she liked the quiet of the place, she also said she liked the cottage.

"In fact," she went on with a mischievous light in her eyes, "so far as I have seen, there's only one thing about the place I don't like; I mean your sour-faced landlady. You must be very sweet-tempered to have borne so long with her; does she always scowl as she did this morning?"

Ruth smiled.

“I fancy she looked crosser than usual, because you are a stranger; the poor woman is shy. I think she does not like me, though I don’t know how I have offended her; she liked my dear father, and she was very attentive to him, so I used not to mind her frowns; they have never troubled me much, I suppose I am not observing,” she said, simply.

Dorothy looked hard at her companion, her insight into character was keener than Ruth’s was, and she had more scope for its exercise; her temperament also was far more nervous and sensitive than Ruth’s.

“You look as if you had always been healthy, dear Ruth,” she said, brightly; she had seen the girl’s eyes fill with tears when she spoke of her father, and she felt that she must cheer her. “You healthy people, who can spend hours in taking in fresh air and sunshine, hardly know, perhaps, how much you owe to such outward helps in the way of calmness and cheerfulness; you look as if you were made of sunshine, and were hardly ever cross, and that is such a

blessing; you and Michael are admirably suited, you will never worry him."

She sighed as she remembered her occasional irritable fits, and the patience her brother had shown her; Ruth did not answer, she sat looking out over the sea.

"Now that I have seen you," Dorothy went on, "I shall be so happy in thinking of you settled in the old Purley house. How glad you will be when this exile is over, and you can be with Michael."

"I have been happy here, you know," Ruth said.

Dorothy gently stroked the hand that lay near hers.

"You have been very good and very patient in bearing this separation, but you do not yet know, as I do, the happiness of living with Michael; the entire trust one feels in him makes life so restful, it seems a part of his nature to inspire trust, and to have entire faith in others. I used to tell him, that when I felt most wretched and weak and irritable, he could always calm me, the very sight of his

steadfast face was enough ; and then one knows that his is not the goodness of mere placid stupidity, I have seen him very angry indeed when anger was needful."

"Yes."

Ruth spoke as if her thoughts were far away ; she could not repress a long shivering sigh.

"I ought to apologize," Dorothy smiled as she spoke, "for troubling you with my ideas about Michael, when of course you love him as well as I do. I am not Quixotic, so I shan't say you love him better ; but you cannot think how I enjoy talking about my brother to you, because I know his praises must interest you."

Ruth had flushed with embarrassment ; she hardly knew what to say.

"Have you always lived together?" she asked.

"Ever since Michael left school, he and I have always kept house together. I used to live with my godmother, who spoiled me, and left me a little independence. I daresay Michael has

told you how soon our father and mother followed one another ; David was away in Scotland when they died, learning to be a lawyer, and Michael became my charge, he never gave me a day's trouble. I think you have a very happy life before you, Ruth."

The girl started up, she did not see Dorothy's appealing glance ; she was beckoning to Watty, who suddenly, and as Ruth thought most fortunately, appeared on the beach. He had been standing there a minute before he was observed, and when he saw that Mrs. Clifford had a companion, he began very gently to retreat, in the hope of escaping unobserved.

"Come here, Watty," Ruth said ; "here's a new friend for you. This is my sister, Miss Clifford."

Watty eyed Dorothy inquisitively, then apparently satisfied with what he saw, he drew nearer, and held out his tiny hand, as if to welcome her to Dolmouth.

"Is you come to live here for always ?" he inquired, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

Dorothy fondled the little hand she held.

“I am come for a little while; as long as my sister wants me.”

She had evidently impressed Watty favourably; he seated himself close beside her, and looked up into her smiling face.

“Does you know some stories what *she* doesn’t know?” he said in a confidential tone.

Ruth laughed and sat down by him.

“Oh, Watty, to think of your deserting an old friend for a new acquaintance, you little turncoat. But I can’t let you tire Miss Clifford; if she is kind enough to tell you one story, remember she can’t tell you another, she is not as strong as I am.”

“As strong as you, why, she’s a mite,” he whistled; “I just ’spect she isn’t strong! Why, you never gets tired, you likes telling stories; when we’s married, you shall tell me stories all day long, ’cept when I’m at school. She’s going to be my wife,” he said to Dorothy.

Dorothy put her arm round the little fellow, and drew him close to her.

"You had better take me for a wife, Watty," she said, "I'm nearer your size, my sister is too tall for you; besides, she has one husband already."

Watty wriggled himself away from her; he looked very determined, and his face was flushed as he stood in front of Ruth, his legs planted widely apart.

"You cruel girl! why didn't you tell me you was married?" his little voice was full of reproach. "You never telled me you'd got one; where is he?" Then, with sudden eagerness, "I say, was that man your husband, the man what came round the point, and stayed such a time with you on the beach, when you sent me to uncle with the message?"

Ruth became very pale, she rose up suddenly from the shingle.

"It is too cold for you, sitting here, I am sure it is, Dorothy. Watty, see if you can find some oyster-shells, and we'll show aunt Dorothy how to play dick, duck, drake."

But oyster-shells proved to be scarce this

morning. Dorothy said she was afraid to sit still any longer, though the air felt to her so much milder than it had been at Dalgarno ; she could hardly fancy it was still January.

Ruth helped her sister-in-law up the steep rough shingle, and when they reached the meadow they saw Watty's nurse coming to seek her charge. The two ladies walked in silence to the cottage.

Ruth was very angry with herself ; her silence she felt, must have led her sister-in-law to believe that the child had seen Michael with her on the beach. She had already gathered from a chance remark, that Dorothy had been kept in complete ignorance of her estrangement from her husband. She could not say who had been with her, because she had no right to speak to her sister-in-law of Mr. Bevington ; that was Michael's secret.

Dorothy meanwhile had received a disturbing shock ; she felt that the pleasure she had found in her new relationship had

lost its reality. "All is not gold that glitters," she said to herself; it seemed to her that if the gentleman Watty spoke of had been Michael, Ruth would not have been so evidently disturbed. She could not help remembering Mrs. Buchan's gossip about the pupil, but she fought loyally against her suspicions; she glanced at the girl's noble face, as Ruth walked beside her, and she noted the deep sadness in her eyes. The brave little woman said to herself that Ruth was Michael's wife, and she would trust her; there might have been some folly in the girl's life, but there had not been sin; she was sure that Ruth was good and honest.

The weeks passed on, Ruth began to recover her spirits in her sister-in-law's bright companionship, and Dorothy grew every day fonder of her; she soon discovered that she could be useful to Ruth, and she began to help the girl with her French, and to read German with her. There had been several heavy snowfalls,

and even Ruth's love of the open air yielded to weather, and she welcomed this opportunity for study.

"It is like going back to old times," and she told Dorothy how she had gone to school with her grandfather. They soon found out a sympathy in books, and Dorothy loved to listen to the girl's pure sweet singing.

One day the little sister said, impulsively, "Nothing fits you so well as singing, Ruth, you look like an angel while you sing."

Ruth had sat singing song after song, at this she abruptly left the pianoforte.

"Please do not say that, I am very unlike an angel; you will say so when you have known me a little longer."

The vehemence in the girl's voice, surprised Dorothy, and yet fascinated her.

"My first reading was the true one," she said to herself; "lately, I have fancied she was cold and equable, I see she is just made for Michael, she has plenty of feel-

ing, still I don't believe she has as much love for him as she ought to have."

Dorothy sometimes thought that she had allowed this lovely creature to bewitch her, she had forgotten her resolution to be extremely wary and prudent in judging her young sister-in-law. She had expected to find in Ruth a strong spirit of resistance, and instead of this, the girl had lovingly welcomed her advice and assistance on many subjects, and had often deferred to her judgment.

Dorothy had brought several books with her; Ruth had taken possession of one of these, and had made it her daily study.

"I wish I had had that book of yours years ago," the girl said, when she rose up from singing; "I must buy it, I can never do without it again."

Dorothy looked at her affectionately.

"I will give it to you, if you like it so much; not that copy," as Ruth kissed and thanked her, "Michael gave me that, and it is a dear old friend, he seems to like that book as much as you do."

Ruth turned away her head, it seemed

as if Dorothy was always reminding her of the future she so greatly dreaded.

The morning after this brought Ruth two letters, and she had been strangely silent since she read them. One was from her cousin Peggy Whishaw, reproaching Ruth for her continued silence, for she had not answered their letters of condolence at the time of her father's death. Peggy went on to say that her mother had been advised to go abroad, as one of her lungs was said to be seriously affected; Miss Whishaw told her cousin, they should start so soon, there would not be time for any leave-taking. If Ruth wished to answer her letter, she had better write to her, "*Poste Restante, Bordighiera.*" Ruth felt strangely desolate while she read; if the worst came to the worst, she had always felt that she could have a home with her aunt.

The other letter was from her husband, and its contents perplexed her. Michael asked her, in the formal manner he had adopted, how she and Dorothy got on together; and whether the air of Dolmouth

suited his sister ? He seemed, Ruth thought, polite but utterly indifferent. He also asked, still in the same way, whether she wished to stay on at Dolmouth till his return, or whether in the event of the house being ready to receive her, she would prefer to go with his sister to Purley.

Ruth had been arguing with herself ever since she read the letter. She wished that Michael had left her in peace ; she was sure that she could never be a good wife to him, as long as she felt a fraction of love for Reginald Bevington. She tried hard not to allow herself to think of her young lover, but for all that, now and then a vivid memory of him, flashed into her mind with solemn warning : how would it be, if fancying herself reconciled to the idea of living with Michael, she were to go home to Purley, and then, a chance sudden meeting with Reginald, might set her against her husband, and make her loathe him.

Ruth had learned much more about herself since she had known Dorothy ; she had

discovered the startling fact, that mere resolution will no more avail to stem the tide of self-will, than a mere barrier set in the sand will avail to break the force of the incoming waves, it must be deeply sunk, and also strongly guarded by other support than its own strength. Ruth had all her life said morning and evening prayers, but it seemed to her that till she knew Dorothy, she had, with few exceptions, repeated her prayers formally, only as an act of duty; as a rule she had not gone to them for comfort and help, or with any belief that they could either help or comfort her.

She had not heard from Mr. Bevington since her father's death. He had answered Philip Bryant's letter of refusal, but she did not know what he had written; her father had put the letter in the fire, and had had the reticence not to speak of it. Ruth had hoped that after a while Mr. Bevington would cure of his infatuation, and that then he would marry. At least she had told herself she hoped this; but

to-day, just after she had read Michael's letter, she had been greatly disturbed, she had seen in the newspaper that the engagement between Mr. Bevington and Miss Stretton was renewed, and that the marriage was to take place after Easter.

The pain she suffered at this news warned Ruth, that her love had not yet received its death-blow.

When she and Dorothy came in from their usual ramble by the sea, Ruth had excused herself from her French reading; she had something else to do, she said, and she had sat by herself in almost complete silence, trying to collect her thoughts and to feel calm. She was utterly unhinged, angry with herself, and ashamed because she could not feel glad at what she knew was likely to prove her best safeguard; she wondered whether Dorothy had seen the announcement, and whether she knew anything about Mr. Bevington.

The days were still short, and as Dorothy was afraid of evening air, they went out

again as soon as lunch was over, and dined in the evening.

To-day, just as they were ready to start, Mrs. Rimell opened the door herself, and, with what seemed to Dorothy a stinging distinctness of tone announced :

“A gentleman for Mrs. Clifford.”

Dorothy looked up in joyful expectation of seeing her brother, and she recognized Mr. Bevington. She had often seen him ride through Purley, but had never till now had a near view of him; she was struck by his good looks, and by his easy grace of manner.

Ruth had risen, she stood pale and silent, her eyes fixed on her visitor.

He looked at Dorothy, and bowed as he spoke.

“I am afraid I am an intruder,” he said in his sweet courteous voice, “but I have come to see Mrs. Clifford on business.” Then he turned to Ruth and said stiffly, “May I ask to see you alone?”

Before Ruth could answer, Dorothy bowed and left the room; there seemed no

other course open to her. There was a slight pause, then Ruth moved towards the door to follow Dorothy.

Bevington placed himself in her way.

"Please stay," he said gently, "I will not keep you long, your reception has already taught me that I am an intruder;" the increasing sadness in his voice softened her; "I have longed to see you to assure you of my sympathy," he paused, looking at her as if his eyes could not satisfy themselves with the sight of her loveliness; she stood half turned away, but he could see her beautiful profile; "I felt deeply the loss of my dear old friend. It would have been kinder if you had let me see him once more." Ruth turned away at this, and he went on. "But I have another purpose in coming to-day; won't you sit down and listen to me?" She shook her head and remained standing. "You are alone in the world now, dearest Ruth, you have no one to study but yourself, and I have come to ask you to decide my future life? I put it in your hands, I ask you to think well before you answer."

He paused again, but Ruth seemed deaf ; she remained standing quite still ; she did not look at him. He went on in a passionate tone : “ You do not even listen, Ruth, darling, you are too unkind.”

At this she raised her eyes, but still she did not speak ; she seemed stupefied.

“ You will have seen or heard—such news always travels fast—that I am going to marry Miss Stretton ; it is for you to decide whether I shall do so.”

“ I ? ” she said faintly, as if the word uttered itself against her will.

“ Yes, you ; in this crisis only you can decide my life for me ; promise me, Ruth, to join your life to mine ; there shall be no trouble, no scandal, I will take you away from England ; we will live where no one knows us,—and, darling, I will make you the happiest woman in the world.”

His words had poured themselves out so rapidly that she could not stop them, her silence had so encouraged him, that though he had come for the purpose of saying all this, his daring way of saying it surprised him ; he had resolved to be

extremely slow and cautious, so as to avoid alarming her; but he was carried out of himself. As he ended he took her hand in his.

She flung it from her with a violence that startled him.

“I want to understand,” she said in a hard, set voice, “whether this lady loves you; whether you have tried to win her love?”

He shrugged his shoulders; he was too much excited to understand her meaning.

“I suppose so—what can that matter to us? I have vexed you by my abrupt proposal, darling; but I love you so, my sweet Ruth—you know how I love you, and you will forgive me.”

She looked fixedly at him, and with sparkling eyes.

“Ask Miss Stretton to forgive you; you have no right to speak to me in this way; but how dared you win *her* love, and promise to marry *her*, and then come to me?” . . . Her words seemed to choke her, she stood gasping for breath, her eyes still fixed on his face.

His fear of losing her robbed him of all restraint.

"I don't care," he said excitedly, "I will marry her if you really think I ought to keep my promise—don't look so vexed, darling, I do not care a straw for her; she need make little difference to us; whether I marry her or not, you will not refuse to make me happy, precious one."

Ruth put out her hand to stop the passionate entreaty of his words, her eyes were full of sternness, all the strength of her nature had at last risen in protest against him.

"Go," she said, "go at once, or I may say out too plainly what I think."

Her determined manner surprised him, he thought she looked more beautiful than ever.

"You are, perhaps, afraid of your little duenna," he said, with a vexed laugh; "But really, Ruth, it is rather late to try heroics with me. I understand you too well for that; trust everything to me, and all will go well. I will leave you now, but I will come again, at once, no matter

when you send for me. I shall stay at Munby,"—he paused, but she still looked stern. "Must I go?"

"You do not understand," she said. "I am Mr. Clifford's wife, and if you try to see me again, you will have to deal with him."

"Mr. Clifford! he has given you up of his own free will; you may do as you please as far as that fellow is concerned."

"Go," she said sternly, as she rang the bell.

"What! Not even your hand?" he said, as she turned away. He bit his lip. "I did not think you were so hard-hearted."

Ruth was quivering from head to foot; and when Mrs. Rimell opened the door, her lodger's flushed face excited the landlady's curiosity.

She had been upstairs with Miss Clifford, and now, as she opened the street door for the visitor, and then closed it behind him, she blew her nose with some vehemence, and smiled at the idea of her evening chat with Miss Tabitha Stamper over this tit-bit of news.

CHAPTER VIII.

IT had been evident to the landlady that the visitor was not a friend of Miss Clifford's; she had heard Dorothy go upstairs directly after his arrival. Besides, the gentleman had only asked for Mrs. Clifford. He had said, when she asked for his name, "You can say a gentleman for Mrs. Clifford." Mrs. Rimell was anxious to know what Miss Clifford thought of this gentleman, and whether she considered him a suitable visitor for her beautiful young sister-in-law. It occurred to the careful landlady that she ought to inquire whether the gentleman would stay for dinner, and that probably Miss Clifford would be able to tell her.

It was a feeble excuse for intrusion, but Mrs. Rimell had dignified her greedy curiosity about her lodger's affairs by the name of conscience; she told herself

that it was her duty to relieve herself of responsibility by passing on her doubts of Ruth to one so nearly connected with the delinquent as Miss Clifford was. Moreover, Tabitha Stamper had already advised her to get rid of her beautiful lodger, so that she might take in a family who had applied to her for the whole house; so Mrs. Rimell went up and knocked at Dorothy's door.

Miss Clifford looked surprised when she opened it, and she frowned as she heard the landlady's question about the visitor.

"Certainly not," she answered, with decision; "the gentleman has only come on business."

Mrs. Rimell gave a doubtful, unpleasant smile; she liked Miss Clifford, but she did not choose to be snubbed without taking her revenge.

"I'm sure I beg pardon, ma'am, but as the gentleman has been here before, and Mrs. Clifford seems so extremely partial to him, I thought he was an old friend, and she would ask him to stay."

Dorothy had felt annoyed, while she thought over Mr. Bevington's visit, and now her vexation turned on the landlady; it seemed to her that the woman was a busybody. She took up the book she had put down at Mrs. Rimell's entrance, by way of dismissing her, but the landlady was bent on being heard.

"You see, ma'am," she went on, in her monotonous, crushed voice, "in my position, I've got to see and hear and say nothing, so as not to get into trouble or give offence; but I have got a conscience, Miss Clifford, and, if you'll believe me, till you spoke just now, I had tried to persuade myself that those two were cousins or some sort of relations that had a right to be fond of one another."

Dorothy gave a surprised stare, but Mrs. Rimell returned her glance in a humble, ill-used way, as if conscious that her efforts at service were not yet appreciated.

"I do not understand you," Dorothy said, impulsively, and then she wished to recall her words, but it was too late.

The landlady's face smoothed with an expression of relief as she answered,—

“Don't you, ma'am? Then I'll speak plainer. You see, ma'am, you, being the sister of Mrs. Clifford's husband, wouldn't, so to say, be likely to fancy that anything could be amiss;”—this was meant for a dig at Dorothy, who, Mrs. Rimell considered, had allowed herself to be humbugged by her handsome sister-in-law, and had regularly spoiled the girl—“I don't mean, ma'am, to say as there's anything as you may say wrong, dear me, no, far from it; but what I mean is, a showy-looking lady is bound to be more cautious than a plain one, isn't she, ma'am? She attracts more notice. You see, ma'am, people *will* talk when a young swell like that meets her alone on the beach and so on, when it's known she has a husband. You see, ma'am, I'd seen Mr. Clifford, your brother, when he engaged the rooms, ma'am; I knew fast enough this one wasn't the husband.”

Dorothy's head seemed to spin while she listened; she was deeply mortified to have

given this woman the opportunity of speaking against Ruth. It seemed to her that the landlady was only doing her duty in speaking out. The troubled sister was perplexed, but she felt that for Michael's sake Ruth must be shielded from any possible scandal. She forced herself to smile at Mrs. Rimell, and thereby shocked that righteous-minded woman.

"You need not trouble yourself about this," she said, with more stiffness than usual; "this gentleman is an old friend of Mr. Bryant's, and it is quite natural that he should come and see Mrs. Clifford. I am sure you mean well, Mrs. Rimell, but pray don't trouble yourself about this, there is no need; I am sorry you have made such a mistake."

Mrs. Rimell stared, but Dorothy was on guard; she looked, perhaps, rather contemptuous, but she did not seem vexed.

The landlady bent her head and opened the door; then she came back, and closed it behind her.

"I ask pardon, ma'am, if I have been

too free, but I have made no mistake. You see, ma'am, I watches and waits, and I've seen what I've seen."

This time Dorothy forced a laugh.

"If I were you, I wouldn't think myself infallible, Mrs. Rimell. That rule of yours to see and hear and say nothing is a safe one to stick to; and I'll tell you something I once heard a very good man say, 'Never believe anything you hear, and only half of what you see.'"

She turned her back on the landlady, as if to show her that she considered the interview ended.

Left alone, Dorothy leaned back in her chair as cold and as white as a stone. Already the remembrance of the child's words had flashed back on her. She remembered, too, how suddenly pale Ruth had grown that day on the beach, and how abruptly she had changed the subject. Dorothy hid her face in her hands; she had braved it out with Mrs. Rimell, but alone by herself she felt stupid with horror. She did not believe, she could not, that this girl, whom she loved so dearly, quite as much for her-

self as because she was Michael's wife, had been unfaithful to her husband.

And, then, the very thought of Michael set Dorothy's anger loose against him. What had he been about? Why had he left this attractive young creature all these dreary weeks alone in this dull place? It was plain that there had been an attachment between the pupil and Ruth; but, now that she had seen the girl, Dorothy considered the fact of such an attachment with different eyes. The poor child had fallen in love with this good-looking young fellow, and no doubt he was very fascinating. Seeing him every day, and living under the same roof, the attachment was really not to be wondered at; only Dorothy wondered how such a girl, with truth written on her face, could have brought herself to marry Michael while she still loved Mr. Bevington.

His visits to Dolmouth seemed to prove that Ruth did really care for him. At this last reflection Dorothy's anger flamed up against her sister-in-law. The girl had never, certainly, by word or look, given

his sister cause to believe that she cared for Michael, but Dorothy wondered how Ruth could have done such a wrong as to marry a man whom almost any girl would have been glad to accept, when she had no love to give him.

“Michael must have found it out,” she thought, “and that caused the estrangement; but even then he might have put his pride in his pocket, and he might have won her in spite of herself. Don’t tell me, Michael could win any girl he chose, if he only thought it worth his while. In this case he must think so, and I firmly believe he is faint-hearted because he considers himself inferior to that handsome young fellow. Bless the dear fellow’s heart, he loves Ruth, but he certainly doesn’t understand her, if he thinks a full-grown woman like that could be satisfied with a mere boy. After all, young Bevington’s only a boy—I could see it as I looked at him—he’s a weak, good-looking boy.”

She made all the excuse she could for Ruth, but she could not conquer the anger

she felt towards her. She was Michael's wife, and she had no right to receive the visits of an old lover.

"Oh, dear! it is terribly sad!" Dorothy felt oppressed and self-pitiful. "I shan't say a word to Michael, but it is plainly my duty to tell Ruth what I think. I—I'd sooner—well, never mind what I'd sooner do, I've got to do this, whether I like it or not. If we quarrel we shall have to part, I fancy, and that will vex Michael very much."

There were sounds below—the street door opened and shut.

"I will wait," Dorothy thought. "She will surely come to me and explain this visit."

She waited till she became so cold that she had to wrap herself in her fur cloak. At last she rose up and went downstairs.

"It is the hardest thing I was ever called on to do," she said, "but it is for Michael, and I must do it."

CHAPTER IX.

IT was a clear, frosty morning. There had been hoar frost earlier, and the hedge twigs glistened like silver ; as Ruth took the road leading to Little Marshfield, every blade of grass beside the way seemed to have taken pattern by the shivering birds, and to have doubled in size beneath its sparkling white covering, and the trees that rose behind the hedges were radiant as the sunshine touched their fairy-like tracery of branches.

Ruth had left the train at the station about a mile beyond Little Marshfield ; she was going to ask Sally Voce to take her in.

She had refused to answer any of Dorothy's questions about Mr. Bevington ; they had quarrelled, and they had agreed to part.

Dorothy had advised Ruth to put herself under her aunt's protection until Michael

came back from his Austrian journey. She told Ruth she was going back to Scotland; they could leave Dolmouth together at the same time, she added.

Ruth had not been able to think since she parted from Mr. Bevington: the shock of his baseness had made her callous to other feelings. While she listened to Dorothy she remembered dimly that her aunt must have started, and that she could not go to her; but she did not say so, it did not matter what became of her; she only longed to get away and hide herself from everyone. When Dorothy assured her that she should not mention Mr. Bevington's visit to Michael, Ruth answered haughtily that she was free to speak of it to whomsoever she pleased:

“Your opinion, or any one's opinion on the subject is completely indifferent to me,” the unhappy girl said.

Yesterday she had left Dolmouth with Dorothy, and they had travelled together almost in silence till they reached the Junction where Miss Clifford had to change. Ruth remained cold and hard, even at parting.

She was in a sort of dumb despair, the last illusion of her love had been torn from her, she felt barren of faith and hope and love.

She began at last to try to consider her plans ; she had been travelling for several hours, and she knew she was a long way north of Little Marshfield. Before she left Dolmouth she had thought of going to Sally Voce, but it had seemed unnecessary to say so to her sister-in-law. Ruth had taken her ticket to Chester, but she decided to leave the train at the next large station, and try to get to Little Marshfield that night. She soon found that this was impossible, so she dined at the buffet, and then waited at the station for the night train.

She had been travelling a good part of the night, she was very tired, and she looked utterly forlorn and dejected as she walked along the ice-bound road. Dorothy had doubted her, and had, therefore, she considered, no right to her confidence ; but Ruth had resolved to tell Michael everything, she would have no more secrets from her husband, and she had begun a

letter to him last night while she waited for the train.

Her heart beat quickly as one after another she recognized familiar landmarks; she had not often walked so far out as this, but she had often driven her father along this road on their way from Newbridge.

She had left her luggage at the station till she should send for it, she carried a good-sized bag with the things she needed for daily use.

Though she had been so much indulged and cared for, Ruth had never been helpless, and since she went to Dolmouth her self-dependence had largely developed; now, as she walked along, she was wishing that she could find some means of living without being wholly dependent on her husband; she could not make any return to Michael for the goodness he had shown her and her father, and her dependence galled her; it galled her more than ever now that she was better able to consider her treatment of her husband from his point of view; it might have been different, she

thought, if he had forgiven her, then she could have asked him to take her back and to let her try to show her penitence, but his last letter had made her feel that she was still unforgiven. Michael had been very liberal to her, and since her father's death she had tried to save, so that she had sufficient money to carry her on for some months, supposing that her present letter should fail to reach her husband. She had directed Mrs. Rimell to forward any letter that might come for her to the old house in Broad Street.

A few steps farther along the road brought her in sight of the two inns; their sign-boards were creaking and complaining as though the brisk cold air affected their joints with rheumatic twinges. At the opening of the lane the little brook was sparkling and babbling merrily, though its further side, under the shade of the thick-growing hedge, was still encumbered with dull, broken ice-flakes. Ruth looked on to the left, and her face cleared when she saw a thin grey spiral of smoke going lazily up from Mrs. Voce's chimney.

The girl smiled sadly, and then she sighed with desperate resignation : she knew she should have to listen to many a sermon from Sally on the subject of being away from her husband ; she also knew that she should be tormented by the old woman's questions, but if Sally was inquisitive she was not a chatter-box, she would not gossip about her young mistress's troubles.

"I shall feel at home with Sally," the girl thought, as she opened the little gate. For a moment her troubles seemed to have slipped away, she was once more a child, petted and cared for by the old servant.

The little front garden looked bare, but it was free from weeds and litter ; there was a plot of Scotch kale, a rather brown and nipped colony of pot-herbs, and a vigorous growth of horse-radish.

At the sound of footsteps on the slaty path a boy came to the door, and stood there whittling a stout stick with a knife.

"Why, George ! is that you ? how you have grown," Ruth cried out, thinking

what a contrast the strongly-built, red-cheeked, coarse-looking boy made to delicate little Watty, who had cried and clung round her neck when she said Good-bye to him.

George looked at her insolently, he hitched up one of his broad shoulders, his head being already a good deal sunk between them.

“Don’t know yer, we don’t have no tramps,” he said, roughly, “you hav’n’t no call to come in gran’mother’s garden.”

The door opened more widely, and Sally peered from behind it.

She reddened at the sight of Ruth, but came forward with a forced smile on her broad face. Sally always grew fatter in winter because she lived more in-doors; her eyes seemed to be mere slits as she fixed them on the girl.

“My sakes ! Miss, Ma’am, I mean ; is it you ?”

“How do you do, Sally ? I want you to take me in for a few weeks.”

The old woman’s face darkened, her eyes became shifty and restless.

She had been carefully noting Ruth's tired face, her drooping eye-lids, and loosened hair, also the want of freshness and daintiness she had been used to see in her young mistress, and she mentally decided that the stories that had reached her were true.

She turned suddenly on George, and gave him a slight cuff on the cheek.

"Get in with you, you young limb," she said; "go and weed the back-garden, 'tain't half done yet."

"Bother, I ain't goin' to be cuffed to it," the boy stuck out his tongue; "matter o' that, it ain't much hurt you can do with that fat 'and o' yourn; I moind yer tongue more'n yer 'and, gran'mother."

Sally took him by the collar, dragged him back into the house, and shut the door upon him.

"I beg pardon, Miss Ruth, I forgot myself—Mrs. Clifford, I should say—but I was took unawares, not expectin' to see you; bless you, ma'am, I'm sorry, but I've got the house full, every corner of it; I've got Lucy and her boy, both of 'em,

and the poor gal is that ill, I hav'n't a minute to call my own ; she needs so much 'tendance, she do. I'm sure I'm very sorry, but I'm more sorry, ma'am, that you should be asking for a lodging in a poor place like this."

Ruth had expected this remonstrance, and she smiled.

"There's no help for it, Sally, till Mr. Clifford comes back from abroad. Miss Clifford and I have been staying together at the sea, but now she has gone home again to her eldest brother, and my own home at Purley," the words sounded strange to her as she said them, "is still in the hands of work-people."

Sally tried to look sympathetic, but she felt unbelieving. She told herself there was some good reason for this separation between husband and wife ; she had had her suspicions at Appledore, and she had learned on good authority that Mr. Clifford had not started on this last foreign journey till after Mr. Bryant's death. It would have been, therefore, gossip said, only

natural if he had taken his wife with him, unless he had something against her. Sally decided that if a side must be taken in this business she should stick by Mr. Clifford; he had done her many a good turn, and no doubt would do her many another; she was not going to take his wife's part against him.

Her continued silence surprised Ruth; the girl held herself very erect as she spoke,—

“If you cannot take me in to sleep, Sally, I fancy you can get a bed for me in the village, and I can board with you.”

Sally looked solemn, and shook her large head.

“You couldn't think of doing such a thing, ma'am; only fancy what Mr. Clifford would say, and how you would set people talkin'. Why, ma'am, shouldn't you go on, and stay at the Church Marshfield Hotel? It ain't more than a mile an' a half further; I'll get a lad to carry your bag, it's a deal too heavy for you, ma'am.”

Ruth looked the woman direct in the

eyes, and Sally's fell under the masterful glance. Ruth was very angry, but she knew it was wiser not to quarrel with Sally Voce.

"I don't know what Mr. Clifford would say to such advice as that, Sally. Fancy my going to a hotel by myself! That would certainly set people talking, and now that I am alone I do not wish to go among strangers. I wanted to come to you so that I might be as private and retired as possible. Can't you think of a neighbour who will let me have a couple of rooms?"

Sally's small eyes blinked; she began to fear she had made a mistake; if Mrs. Clifford was, as she had been told, cast off by her husband, she would, the old woman fancied, hardly dare to speak in this way. For all that Sally would not alter her determination, she had said she would not be mixed up in this affair of Mrs. Clifford's, and she meant it; she did not want to quarrel with her, but she must get rid of her the best way she could.

"There ain't nobody here, ma'am, as

have got a fit place for you to set down in; if Lucy, now, wer'n't such a poor ailin' creetur, only half alive, one may say, I'd turn her out to make room for you; but Lor', there, I know you wouldn't hear of such doin's, ma'am. I did hear as George Bird had a room to spare, and was wantin' a lodger, but that was, maybe, seven weeks ago, an' since then I hav'n't heard a word from Appledore; the new tenant have fallen ill when last I heard, and there was a talk about his givin' up the farm to the agent."

Ruth's heart fluttered so that she could hardly speak; she had thought of going over one day to have a look at the old place, but the idea of being able to live close to it had not occurred to her.

"Very well, I will go on there at once, I dare say Bird's room will do. Perhaps, Sally, you will manage to send my bag over to Appledore before evening; I expect I shall do very well with the Birds."

Ruth had inward qualms as she thought of Mrs. Bird's shiftless ways, and her

unruly children; she knew, however, that the woman was clean, and she hoped she should be able to put up with the accommodation.

“Good-bye, Sally,” she said, “don’t forget the bag.”

Sally’s face broadened into a smile, and she became suddenly hospitable.

“Lord sake, Miss Ruth, you wouldn’t put such a slight on me as not to eat or drink in the place afore you sets on walkin’ again. Come in, do’ee, now, ma’am, and rest ye a bit; we’ll be gettin’ dinner in an hour or so.”

Ruth shook her head.

“No, thank you, Sally, I’ll not have anything, I’ll go on at once; I can rest when I get to the end of my journey. Good-day; I hope Lucy will soon be better.”

Ruth hardly waited for the old woman’s assurance that the bag should be at Appledore almost as soon as she would; she hurried to the gate, and went down beside the sparkling water till she once more reached the road.

And then, when she was quite out of sight of the village, and could see only the hard, white road before her, with its stiff hedges on either side, Ruth's heart swelled till it seemed to fill her throat; she broke down and cried bitterly; she shed perhaps the bitterest tears of her young life. She had thought Sally Voce inquisitive; she had sometimes feared the woman preferred rich people to poor ones; but Ruth had never thought that the old servant would prove ungrateful to those whose bread she had eaten, and who had done so much for her in her troubled days. The girl knew that her father had urged Mr. Stokesay to make the provision for his housekeeper which Sally now lived on.

“I will not think of her.” She wiped her tears roughly away. “Trouble seems to be following me; I suppose Dorothy will think I deserve it. I dare say I do, but that does not make it easier to bear.”

She presently felt so tired that she sat down on a heap of stones beside the road. She had bought some sandwiches at the

last station the train stopped at, and she began to eat these while she rested.

A lark was singing blithely above her, as if he thought it a cheerful sight to contemplate this weary, tear-stained face. Ruth looked up, but she could not at first see him against the fleecy clouds overhead. She noticed the buds on the hedge, and wondered whether they would be checked later on. She sighed.

“It will be a long time before I can feel hopeful,” she said. “I could not have eaten anything belonging to that ungrateful woman ; I believe her bread would have choked me.”

She was still very tired when she rose up to resume her walk. The way seemed longer than usual, yet, as she went on the old familiar landmarks soothed her ; she felt at home again as she recognized Farmer Jones’s gate, which her father had once told her she could not climb, when she was a tiny girl ; and there was Mrs. White’s larch plantation, with its as yet unfolded tassels of blossom shrouded in

dazzling white. How well she remembered Mrs. White, and the huge slices of seed cake the kind woman used to give her.

“I wonder who has the place now?” she thought.

By the time she reached Church Marshfield every one was at dinner; smoke was going up from most of the chimneys, and savoury smells floated out into the air as Ruth passed the few houses that lay between her and Appledore.

It seemed to Ruth, as she walked along, that the road was peopled with ghosts; her father was there, and her mother, and her grandfather. As she passed Mr. Stokesay's deserted cottage she hardly dared to look at the masses of red berries on its dusty front, she so strongly expected to see the old scholar in his long skirted robe standing watching for her at the gate. Michael's face came among these phantoms. She remembered how much her grandfather had liked to talk to him, and how, more than once, Mr. Stokesay had told her she might read any book

safely that Mr. Clifford lent her, because his taste might be trusted. Her own early thoughts and fancies came back in a crowd from those past years ; the road seemed, with every turn it took, to reveal fresh ones, till now forgotten. She remembered Michael's constant visits, and how she used to look forward to them ; her cousin Peggy had even joked her about her frequent mention of Mr. Clifford in her letters.

"If he had asked me then," she said, "before I knew anything about love, I believe I should have said 'Yes' cheerfully."

It was not the first time this remembrance had come to Ruth ; she had thought of it before she decided to accept Michael, but at that time she had told herself that nothing in the world could make her sorry that she had been loved by Reginald Bevington, his love had then seemed a possession to be thankful for ; she had then thought that she should never have known the real happiness of love if he had not come to Appledore.

These thoughts came back and stung her as she walked. A cloud had settled on the vision that had once seemed so bright; it was more than a cloud, Ruth felt, with a shiver, that there was a foul smear on the memory of her love; every hour since Mr. Bevington's last visit to Dolmouth the unhappy girl's conviction had become stronger that he had never been honest in his professions; he had meant her ruin, not her happiness. His ideas of love and hers were, she now knew, as opposite as light and darkness.

And yet, although she had tried to think the worst of him, she did not even now hate him; she excused him on the ground of her own blind weakness; in her utter ignorance she had led him to believe that his love was welcome, when she ought to have resented it as an insult. It was, perhaps, natural that she should not make allowance for his weakness of character; it seemed to her that he had never thought of her as his future wife. . . .

She had reached the gate that led to

the Mill Valley, and she hurried past it with a shudder at her own heedless folly in consenting to meet her lover there, and then a sudden sense of thankfulness. A few minutes later she was looking down from the road across the home-mead on to the moss-crowned tiles and the twisted chimney-stacks of Appledore Farm.

Ruth's eyes filled with tears till her sight was completely dimmed ; she wondered whether trouble would meet her here again, and whether the Birds would prove themselves as inhospitable as Sally Voce had been. Hitherto she had only met a couple of tramps, male and female, on the road, the man had leered so unpleasantly as he looked at her, that Ruth thought she would smooth her hair and straighten the set of her hat before she presented herself to the Birds.

The thorn-bush at the corner of the lane, which had often come in her way when she was watching for her father, now served as a welcome screen, behind which she strove to tidy her hair and to

remove the traces of disorder from her general appearance.

She could not remove the look of fatigue from her worn face, but she resumed the little veil which she had taken off when she quitted the train, she fancied that this screen would give her a married look that would impress the Birds. Their cottage lay behind the farm-yard, and she had meant to go round by the road to the farm entrance; but as she tried to pass the lane, she found that instinctively her feet moved towards it. It was not far to the house, and she could easily come back again to the road. She reached the bottom of the lane, and stood at the gate.

The flower border was bare except for a tuft of Christmas roses near the porch; over the porch itself, and spreading over the adjacent house-wall, was a profusion of pale yellow jasmine blossoms against their leafless green stems. Ruth looked up at the windows; they were all closed except that of the bedroom over the porch. She looked quickly away; she remembered

that had been Reginald Bevington's room.

All at once a sharp cry startled her : a child came running forward, stumbled, and fell on his face on the rough gravel in front of the porch. While Ruth hesitated whether she should open the gate and help the little frightened creature, Mrs. Bird's head was put out of the porch-room window. Her frown indicated that she was going to scold the unlucky squaller, and then, as her mouth opened full of reproaches, she recognized her young mistress, and she smiled with hearty satisfaction.

"Mercy on us!" she cried. "I'm proud to see 'ee, ma'am. To think o' that, now! Here! Gearge! Gearge! Where be 'ee, man? Coom here! coom quick, I tell 'ee! Here be Miss Bryant as was, Missus Clifford as is, an' she be a standin' at the ge-at."

CHAPTER X.

GEORGE BIRD did not trouble his head about politics as much as many of his fellows did, but he must have had an unconscious and early belief in Conservatism. He had lived on Appledore Farm from a boy of twelve, even at that age big-boned and strongly made, and except that he had grown bigger and handsomer—the difference between a bull calf and the full-grown animal—there had been no other change in him. He had put aside his “larnin’,” as he called it, when he left school to begin farm work ; he never tried to read even the local newspaper, though his wife spelled it over diligently on Sunday evenings when the children were in bed. He rarely went beyond the farm, nor did he believe in any very modern im-

provement with respect to farming ; that which had done for his father would do for him, he said. The only matter that roused the big fellow out of his ordinary serenity was his dislike to new-fangled “nossions,” as he called Mr. Clifford’s advice on several points, chiefly of a sanitary nature, with regard to the care of the stock ; for of late years, since Mr. Bryant’s troubles and the consequent diminution of hands on the farm, George Bird had become a sort of Jack - of - all - trades, and, consequently, everything was more or less in disorder.

The tenant who had succeeded Philip Bryant had been obnoxious to Bird ; he was a young man, full of the last new ideas, having been educated at the Agricultural College. The hopeless state of the drainage, and the ruinous condition of the fences and out-buildings at Appledore, had so completely disenchanted him with the place, that he soon gave notice to quit. He wrote to the absentee landlord that Appledore was not what it had been represented to be, and he threatened law

proceedings unless either the necessary improvements were immediately made or he was released from his bargain. The landowner was exploring in Central Africa, and the sleepy agent, who had neglected to inspect the place before he accepted this new tenant, thought it was safer to release him than to incur, till his employer returned, what might prove a serious outlay. He came over and told Bird that his wife must keep the house aired and clean till further orders. So the new tenant departed, extremely glad to be free of his bargain.

Susan Bird told her husband that the easiest way for her to do her duty by the house would be to move out of the cottage, which had already become too small for her yearly increasing brood, and set up her household gods in the farm-house ; she had, however, been wise enough to occupy only the kitchen and the servants' bed-rooms, and it had occurred to Bird, who highly approved his wife's happy idea, that they might make a few pounds, if they could find

a lodger to keep the best rooms aired through the winter.

He had gone on hoping to hear of an inmate, but without success, and Mrs. Clifford's arrival seemed to him a special Providence ; it gave him a real excuse for remaining in his comfortable quarters ; for now and then he had felt a trifle uneasy lest the Rector should hear of what had happened, and call him to account for his residence in the farm-house. He had more than once thought of writing to ask leave from the agent, but writing had always been a toil, and he had almost forgotten how to do it. He did not choose to ask a neighbour to write for him, for that would at once betray that he was living at the farm without leave. When, therefore, Mrs. Clifford arrived and appeared to take it for granted that the agent had put Bird in possession till a new tenant could be found, his liking for his old master's daughter came back with an added sense of indebtedness for the weekly payment she promised to bestow on his wife.

Susan Bird looked on her handsome husband as a sage, and she was quite of his opinion, when he said that Mrs. Clifford was a very ill-used young lady, in being left to go about and fend for herself. Not that George Bird took this or anything else to heart ; it may be that in his composition heart was an almost unknown quality ; he was amiable, he thought his wife and children better than those of his neighbours ; he was good-natured and fairly sober, but he loved money with a passion that absorbed other feelings.

To-day, as he stood in the farm-yard, slowly chewing the bit of straw that rarely left his lips, the brilliant sunshine lighting up his tawny mass of hair and beard, so curly that the upper and thinner part shone like gold in the full light, while the tangle below made a rich brown contrast, he looked a fine specimen of an English peasant. So much of his face as was seen under his broad-leaved straw hat was vividly rich in colour, his brown-red eyebrows went well with the rest ; as he

stood facing the sunshine, they came heavily down over his sleepy very brown eyes.

Presently he went into the house-place where Ruth was with his eldest child Sukey.

He was proud of the notice Mrs. Clifford took of his children, and he liked to hear her talk; "Tell 'ee what 'tis, Sue," he said to his wife, "she's got such a pleasant, cheery voice, she makes a fellow feel jolly by the way she speaks to him."

He still considered Ruth his mistress, and was willing to take orders from her, though he knew her connection with Appledore was at an end. Something that was almost gratitude sounded in his voice as he answered a proposal Mrs. Clifford had just made.

"Ye're mighty kind, mum, I'm sure, 'tis a change for the little lass, an' change is mostly what they look fur; when I wur a lad, change so to say wasn't thought on; I hopes as you finds Sukey dutiful, mum, but—" he paused to find words for what he wanted to say, "askin' your par-

don, mum, doesn't you think as gals does as well wi'out books as with 'em?"

Ruth laughed so heartily that he hung his head and looked bashful.

"Well now, Bird," she said, "you're the last man who ought to say that; see what a hard-working, good wife you have got, and yet she is fond of reading."

Bird grinned till he looked like a handsome satyr.

"I'll tell ye the secret o' that, mum; afore we wuz married Sue wur allus too fond of readin', she wur, an' I saw it; she brought a store o' books when she come to me, a dozen or more on 'em; well, mum, one day when I knowed she wur busy, I up an' took my gal's books, tales they was and such, an' I chucked 'em on a-heap o' stuff what the master wur a-burnin' yonder," he pointed to the hill behind the house, "they wurn't long burnin', ma'am," he ended with a chuckle.

Ruth looked very grave.

"That was cruel, Sue had a right to be very angry."

He looked puzzled.

“Do ’ee think that, mum? mebbe ladies has time for readin’, an’ so on, but not Sue. Bless her, she whined a bit, an’ I says, ‘Look you here, my gal, I don’t mean it onkind, but don’t ’ee read no more books, ’cept the Bible, an’ once week I’ll get ’ee a sight o’ the noospaper.’ ”

Ruth turned her back on him. The girl, Sukey, had been crippled since the Bryants had left Appledore, by a fall from a swing. The child inherited her mother’s love of reading, and she cried bitterly when she learned that she could never hope to go to school again; the doctor said her only chance of recovery was in lying stretched out flat for a year or more on the board which the Rector’s kindness had provided for her. But a year seemed an eternity to Sukey, and she had turned her face to the wall, and refused to be comforted.

Ruth had found in this afflicted child a true angel of peace.

After the first solitary evening spent in the old parlour peopled by so many memories, where even the old furniture helped to remind her of past joy and past

suffering, Ruth had told herself that she could not stay at Appledore; she would not even stay to finish the letter she had begun to her husband.

In the morning she had gone into the house-place. Below the sunny window, in which Ruth used to dry her herbs and rose-petals, lay poor pale Sukey; Sukey, who had been outwardly just such another embodiment of sunshine and health as her father, lay changed as it were from a flower into a stone, her white face framed by her loose tawny-coloured hair.

Ruth was strongly impressed by this change, she bent over the sick girl and kissed her.

Later in the day she said to Susan Bird, whose eyes filled with tears when she looked at her helpless child, "See here, Susan, I want to do something to help you, let me take charge of Sukey. I'll sit with her, and try to cheer her up a bit; perhaps I can teach her a little, while the others are at school."

Ruth had been doing this for several weeks past; and she had resolved to

stay. The weather had been fine, and had tempted her to take longer walks, but she had not neglected Sukey; the child's heavy eyes always brightened at the sight of her friend, and the treasures which Ruth brought in from her walks—a wild blossom, a richly coloured leaf, sometimes a curious beetle, and once a sick chicken for Sukey to nurse back to health; all these novelties brought the breath of outside life to the weary girl and cheered her.

At first Ruth had forced her own spirits for the sake of poor fractious Sukey, who still at times complained loudly of the hardship of her lot, but soon, and almost in spite of herself, Ruth's spirits rose again; the children, noisy as they were, amused her by their quaint ways as she played with them; she was growing more like the Ruth Bryant of her girlish days than she had been since she went away to nurse her Aunt Whishaw; she had found an object in life, some one to whom her care was really necessary and who loved her.

This morning Sukey had seemed so much better, that her friend fancied she might begin to learn again. Ruth had discovered that the worst sting of Sukey's sorrow lay in the fact that her younger sisters would "all pass her in learnin'," and that she, who had never yet lost a place in class, should be left behind, "the dunce of the family."

Ruth looked over the child's school-books, and found that a few new ones were needed; she heard that Bird was going into Newbridge, and she asked him to purchase these books for her, thereby eliciting, as we have seen, his ideas on the subject of female schooling.

Ruth had finished her letter to her husband, and had announced her arrival at Appledore; in her letter she told him of Mr. Bevington's visit, and also of Dorothy's departure, but she did not tell him of his sister's suspicions; she had grown to think that she had judged Dorothy hardly, and that if she herself had been less proud, Dorothy would not have gone

away and left her alone. She had received one letter from Michael, addressed to Dolmouth; it was evident he had not heard from her; he wrote in some trouble, the journey had taken far longer than he had counted on, and his friend had fallen ill at a small town on the Danube, where the accommodation was so second-rate that Michael could not possibly leave him behind; he said the length of the delay would depend on his friend's recovery, but he could not reach England nearly as soon as he had hoped.

Ruth had little time now in which to feel dull or lonely; she had given herself another charge beside Sukey; she had a good notion of cookery, though she had rarely practised it, and she was trying hard to improve Mrs. Bird's very primitive culinary methods. Ruth had a simple cookery-book, and she persuaded the woman that she would find it interesting, and useful too, to study this sometimes by way of a change from the weekly newspaper, to which she was so devoted; and

as success in cookery is sure to bring its own reward, Susan soon grew delighted and surprised with her improved power of roasting and boiling, in place of the incessant stews to which she had hitherto doomed her husband and children.

Bird applauded the change by smacking his lips when he came in from work, at the sight of his improved rations ; but he shook his head at Susan's efforts at pastry-making on the new lines.

" 'Tis well enough, Sue," he said, with his mouth full of rhubarb pie, on the evening of his return from a second visit to Newbridge, "'tis all as should be for folks like Miss Ruth an' such as she, but gi' me paste as 'ull stan' a hearty bite, that's yer sort ; this kind o' trumpery goes nigh to melt as soon as 'tis in yer mouth, there bean't no stay for the teeth in't ; 'twould suit the new married folk rarely."

He had been telling his wife during supper the talk he had heard about Mr. Bevington's wedding, the bride's home,

Stretton Castle, being only a few miles from the town of Newbridge.

“ ’Tis a splendid place they say, an’ she a on’y child a’ rollin’ in money ; my word, our young gen’l’mán have knowed how to take his pigs to a good market ; ’tis well to be he.”

Bird sighed as he filled his pipe.

Susan sat meditating ; in that June the year before last, various little things had made her fancy that Mr. Bevington and Miss Ruth cared for one another ; it was she who had talked about it to Sally Voce ; it therefore seemed to her a fortunate piece of news that the gentleman had followed Mr. Clifford’s example, and had taken a wife.

“ I thought the weddin’ was over,” she said ; “ I don’t read the paper as reg’lar as I used, but I saw the marriage was goin’ to be sooner than this.”

“ It wur so,” he answered, without removing his pipe from his mouth, “ it wur mebbe three weeks or more ago ; ’tis an old story by now ; ’tis the comin’ ’ome which

has set people talkin' again, that is to be looked for sooner than was expected. Lord, there will be foine doin's!" he ended with a whistle.

Susan cleared away the supper, washed up, and then sat down at the end of the long kitchen table to darn a heap of family socks and stockings. Ruth had tried to teach the hard-worked mother that darning stockings was, on the whole, a more profitable occupation than knitting them.

While she sat drawing out her long needleful of grey worsted from one side to the other of a gaping hole, Susan wondered whether Mrs. Clifford had heard of the marriage, and whether it would not be kind to tell her about it.

Next morning, when she took in breakfast to Ruth, Mrs. Bird ventured to say she hoped the new married folks would have it fine for their home-coming; had Mrs. Clifford heard that they were coming home on Saturday to Stretton Castle, and that old Mr. and Mrs. Bevington were to

be there to meet their son and his bride ?

“ I hope the weather will be fine,” Ruth said.

She was reading ; she did not raise her eyes from her book, and poor simple Susan was left in doubt about the effect of her news. Ruth had, however, seen the announcement of the marriage in the paper ; for her own sake she had been relieved to see it, it freed her from all fear, and it deepened the sense of thankfulness which was now ever present. Two letters from Mr. Bevington had followed her from Dolmouth, and she had destroyed them unopened ; she feared if she sent them back the postmark might betray her hiding-place. She was sorry for Miss Stretton, but then she had told herself marriage might benefit Mr. Bevington ; he might become really attached to his wife, and begin a new course of life. She had, however, turned from the thought as soon as possible ; she felt sorry Susan had now recalled it.

The post had brought her another letter from her husband ; he told her he had not yet heard from her, and that her silence made him anxious ; he was more hopeful about his friend, and he said he might return sooner than he expected when he last wrote. If she had written to Vienna, as he told her to do, he should find her letter there as he returned.

This letter had agitated Ruth ; in the afternoon her old friend the Rector came to see her, and he rejoiced to hear that she was expecting her husband.

“It is time your husband came home,” he said. “I do not like to think of you shut up alone with these uncouth people, though I can see you are a great help to them.”

She smiled rather sadly.

“They are all I have left to care for now,” she answered, “even my favourite cows have disappeared ; nothing is as it used to be at Appledore, yet I find life very tolerable here.”

“You were never discontented, Ruth ;

you had a way of making the best of things at all times," he said, smiling. "I, on the contrary, sometimes find the Rectory very dull ; it will be a real charity if you will come in and lunch with me next Sunday," the kind old man added.

BOOK THE EIGHTH.

Book the Eighth.

CHAPTER XI.

RUTH's days were so full of occupation, that they passed by more quickly than she had expected. She had not heard again from Michael, but a change had passed over her; it had come so gradually that she had hardly been conscious of its progress till she found herself one morning wishing for a letter from her husband; she became aware that she no longer shrank from his return. She told herself that she did not love him, she thought it was impossible to love twice in a lifetime, but she knew that if he would forgive her and take her for his wife, she should be able to do her duty, and she hoped she might make him

happy that seemed to be the work that life held for her in the future.

The great obstacle between them was removed; she did not disguise from herself the sin and the shame of having persisted in loving Mr. Bevington after her marriage to Michael, she could never forget her love. But it was no longer a pleasant memory, it was a sad and shameful blot in her past; the struggle against it had left her, her mind was not tempted to linger on a time of which she felt so truly and heartily ashamed.

She was very anxious on one point, though she strove to be resigned; her husband's letters were cold and brief; it was possible that when he returned he might propose a separation. Ruth felt that she must abide by his decision, she had no right to appeal against it; and she had resolved, if her fears were verified, to ask the Rector to put her in the way of educating herself for the post of a village schoolmistress; she would not be dependent on Michael unless she was his wife.

It was one of those March afternoons when the outside world looks the quintessence of brightness, and the east wind cuts like a double-edged knife. Ruth came in shivering from her walk, though the scorching sunshine had flushed her face ; she had brought in an abundance of wild primroses and wood-anemones for Sukey ; it was a delight to the child to hold some of the cool fresh stalks in her feverish hands, while Mrs. Clifford was filling saucers and soup plates with the rest.

“ They are lovely and sweet,” the child pressed them to her lips ; then came a deep sigh, “ Oh ma’am, shall I never see them growing again ? ”

Her blue eyes swam with tears as she looked at Mrs. Clifford.

“ I hope so, but I tell you what it is, Sukey,” her friend said cheerfully, “ to-day you’ve got to be very glad it was I who had to go out instead of you ; the wind might have cut you into small bits. But I have found a plan for you to get out, and next time I see Dr. Buchan I’m going to

talk to him about it; what do you think? You can have a little carriage, a sort of perambulator, and you and your board can be put on it, and then you can go as far as the wood; isn't that a fine idea, eh?"

Sukey clasped her thin hands in a kind of ecstasy, she thanked Mrs. Clifford with tears in her eyes; but Ruth was not looking at her, she was standing up listening with a kind of horror in her widely opened eyes, while the flowers lay loosely between her fingers.

"Sukey," she looked so troubled, that the child started in surprise, "if your father comes in and asks for me, you must say I am gone out; I am going now."

"Won't you be tired, ma'am? Must you go? Oh, please, won't you tell me more about the carriage what'll take me to the wood afore you goes?"

For the first time Mrs. Clifford turned abruptly away from her charge, she went out of the room even, while Sukey called out to her that she had promised to set her a sum. Ruth paused when she reached

the hall, and then, instead of going out again, she changed her mind, and went softly upstairs ; she walked quietly along the gallery, and opened and closed the door of her room with the utmost caution ; then she sat down to think.

She had heard Reginald Bevington's voice, talking to Bird just outside the door of the house-place, and a sudden terror had seized her.

At first she had felt strongly indignant, but on reflection she decided that he could not know she was at Appledore ; she had not even written to tell Dorothy ; she so greatly feared the news might leak out before Michael's return.

The only person who knew where she was was the person who forwarded her letters from Purley, and she believed that must be Mr. Wood, for Dorothy had told her, that in view of his numerous absences, so much more prolonged since his marriage, Michael had found it necessary to appoint Mr. Wood his manager, and as the young fellow had very little business of

his own, and had proved very useful, Dorothy said that in the end he would probably become Michael's partner. Ruth thought it possible that the manager might have told Mr. Bevington where she was, and yet this was hardly likely; for when she wrote to ask Mr. Wood to forward her letters to Appledore, she had asked him not to give her new address to Dr. Buchan, or to any one likely to come out from Purley to see her. It was more probable, she thought, that Mr. Bevington, who would now, doubtless, have land of his own to see after, had come over to ask Bird a few questions relative to farming matters, for with all his easy laziness, Bird was considered a rare hand in the matter of seed-sowing, his luck therein being proverbial.

The girl was tempted to smile at her own self-conscious fear, but she could not shake off a sorrowful dread that Michael might hear of this visit and misconstrue it before he received the letter she had written him when she determined to remain at Appledore.

She could not keep still, and restlessness was such an unusual feeling that she yielded to the power with which it took possession of her. She felt that she must be a prisoner till Mr. Bevington had departed, and she crept into one of the empty bedrooms on the farther side of the dark gallery which looked on to the farm-yard. As she had expected, the lattice was closed; Ruth moved close to it and listened. Yes, there was a sound of voices from below, but she could not distinguish them, as she could just now in the house-place. She took out her handkerchief and rubbed away the dust from one of the diamond-shaped panes; as she peered through it, she suddenly drew back, so that she could see without any chance of being seen.

Mr. Bevington had come out from the house, and was crossing the farm-yard followed by George Bird.

Ruth looked across to the gate leading to the road, and she saw a boy there holding a horse. A feeling of relief came to

her ; if Mr. Bevington had meant his visit for her, he would have had his horse taken to the stable ; it was evident, she thought, he had only come to ask a question or two about farming of Bird, who had always been a favourite of his.

The two men were now standing still. All at once she saw Bevington put his hand in his pocket ; he took a letter from it and gave it to Bird. Then she saw him put money into Bird's ready palm, and point to the letter he had given him.

The room seemed to go round with Ruth ; a deadly sickness seized her and she clung close to the bare wall against which she stood.

She soon recovered herself, she was not afraid now, because she no longer feared herself ; she knew that the shock which had for a moment mastered her had been caused by horror at the baseness of these two men, they were both seeking to betray her ; and in these last weeks she had been telling herself how much more worthy of trust Bird had proved than Sally Voce—

Sally whose ingratitude and worldliness had, for the time, completely shaken the girl's belief in human nature.

Ruth knew that Mr. Bevington's home lay far away northwards, so that she rejoiced when she saw him mount his horse, and take the road towards Purley. She waited till he had been for some time out of sight before she ventured into the garden, she felt a longing for air and space to quiet her indignant disgust.

She paced up and down the garden for some time thinking till her face burned with shame, and her proud head sank forward with the weight of her humiliation.

When at last she went back to Sukey, she saw, as she expected, a letter lying on the tiny table which she had given the child, to hold her books and flowers.

"See here, ma'am, I've got a present for you," the child said ; "father told me as I wur only to let *you* see it; I wur to hide it, he said, if mother comed in; you would like to have it private, father said, so I

thought mebbe it wur a Valentine come too late."

The child's inquisitive glance gave Ruth exquisite pain ; at that moment her wrath burned hotly against George Bird, she even longed to lay a horsewhip across his shoulders : how dared he teach Sukey to keep a secret from her mother, and to make her inquisitive about other people's business.

She took up the letter, looked at the address, and then put it down on the table beside her, while she set Sukey the promised sum on her slate : as the line of pale-grey figures grew under her fingers, Ruth told herself she could send back Mr. Bevington's letter without any fear of betraying her place of refuge ; she would post it herself from All Marshfield, she hoped when he saw it had not been opened he would cease his unmanly persecution.

She went to the parlour, glad to get away from Sukey's watchful eyes, and then, tired as she was, she started for the little wayside post-box. As she returned,

a new thought came to her and she went round by the farm-yard entrance.

She found Bird, as she expected, lounging about; he was not chewing a straw, he was smoking a pipe, and he looked less sleepy than usual. He touched his hat when he saw her, and she fancied she saw a faint grin on his face.

She frowned till her fair forehead was furrowed with lines. "Look here, George," she said sternly, between her set teeth, "if you bring me any more letters from Mr. Bevington, or if you have anything more to do with him, I'll write to the agent, and I'll have you turned away from Appledore. I am in earnest, remember."

She had reached the kitchen door before the astonished man recovered his surprise. She knew that he would not dare to follow her into his wife's domain, even if he wished to justify himself. But it was as much as she could do to stand chatting a minute or two with Susan, and then avoiding the house-place, she went into the par-

lour; she closed the door behind her, seated herself beside the hearth, and hid her face in her hands. . . . Her head sank forward, till she sat crouched together; her face, hidden by her long trembling fingers, almost touched her knees; how she had loved and trusted this man Bevington—man! he was not worthy of the name; he was willing to betray a wife who trusted him, and had enriched him, and he desired, if he could, to ruin another man's wife. Yet she had loved him, and had counted his love a possession. She shuddered, for she saw herself as she felt Michael must have seen her.

Beside the figure of this poor, pitiful seducer, whose one aim in life had been, she told herself, that of self-pleasing, there rose up the image of her husband—her husband as she had last seen him, flushed with righteous anger, yet with a nobility of truth in this very anger that had even then left with her an indelible memory. How could she hope that so pure and lofty a mind as Michael's could forgive her for

having set this dishonouring love before his earnest devotion? She could not hope for pardon; yet, humanly speaking, his protection and counsel were now urgently necessary to her.

She went at last to the writing-table, and wrote a letter to her husband on her knees. . . . Something seemed to tell her he was on his way home.

CHAPTER XII.

MICHAEL was on his way home, he had determined to take his wife by surprise, and to see whether he could not end the miserable state of things between them, one way or the other. Far away from the associations connected with the deep sadness of his life, in the silent night-watches beside his friend's sick-bed, he had again and again gone over the past months, and he had severely blamed himself for his treatment of Ruth; he had left her unprotected, exposed perhaps to temptation, at least to annoyance; and these hours of reflection had made him see many things in a fresh light, he burned with impatience to return. He started for home as soon as his friend could travel.

When they reached Vienna, he inquired

at the Post-office, and his wife's letter was handed to him; the date showed him that it had been lying there for several weeks, though he had more than once written for his letters from the little town by the Danube. His impatience so increased as he read this letter, that when he reached London, he said Good-bye to his friend, and hurried on to Purley by the night train.

Ruth had sent her last note to Purley, and he found it there waiting for him.

He had felt very hungry on arriving, but when he had read this note he pushed aside his breakfast, and pulled out of his breast-pocket the much longer letter he had found waiting for him at Vienna; he placed the two letters side by side.

The first was headed Dolmouth, and it began,—

“MY DEAR HUSBAND,

“I told you when I last wrote, how much I liked Dorothy, and that I hoped she would stay here with me till your return. Dorothy has since then tired

of Dolmouth; she asks me to tell you she is going back to Scotland, after she has paid a visit to her friend at Carlisle. I am so sure that I ought not to stay here alone, that I am going to Sally Voce. I will stay with her till I hear from you whether you will join me at Little Marshfield, or whether you wish me to meet you at Purley."

Michael was even more impressed by the changed tone of this letter than he had been when he first read it at Vienna; it seemed to him so wife-like. Ruth's former letters had been kind, but they might have been written by a friend who was wholly independent of her correspondent. This letter was written at intervals; it began at Dolmouth, then there was a bit from the railway station Ruth had waited at; it went on again from Appledore in a changed tone. "It was very painful to be here at first, but now I find it pleasant and peaceful," she wrote. "I went to see Sally, but she had no room, and I am in the old house, as the tenant has given it up. I

should like you to find me here when you come back, it would be like those old times when you were always so kind to me ; perhaps you have forgotten them, but I often think of them. If, however, you consider it better I should meet you in Purley, please send me word, and I will go to Broad Street ; it must, of course, be just as you wish."

There was a good deal more in the way of inquiry about his journey, and Ruth added that she should not write again till she heard he had received this letter ; then came the bit which had so roused his impatience to reach England. " The reason why I am sure you would have wished me to leave Dolmouth, is that Mr. Bevington came again to see me there ; he had come twice while my father was with me, but he had been so strongly forbidden to come again, that I thought there was no chance he would do so. Believe me, Michael, I shrink from seeing him as much as you can wish ; you will be glad to hear that it is said he will soon be married."

This morning's letter was much shorter. It began,—

“MY DEAR HUSBAND,

“Something tells me that you are on your way home; I send this letter to Purley, to await your arrival. Can you forgive my long blindness, my hateful ingratitude? Will you trust me to try and make you happy? You cannot guess how anxiously I wait for your answer,

“Your RUTH.”

She had not spoken of Mr. Bevington's last visit to Appledore, she had felt as she wrote that his name would poison the joy she should feel in Michael's pardon.

This letter excited Michael beyond all power of self-control, he had not written to announce his arrival to Mr. Wood, and he was all the better pleased to start off for Appledore before his manager was likely to appear at the office.

It was a louring morning, and a good deal of comment was made by the Broad

Street gossips on the subject of Mr. Clifford.

Instead of following his long-established custom of leaving the town on horseback, he sent to that most ancient hostelry, the "Prince of Wales," one of the oldest in the kingdom, for a trap with a hood, put therein one of his travelling bags, just as it came up from the railway station, and then drove away down Broad Street, and under the low-browed archway that ends it, towards the bridge leading to the Church Marshfield Road.

He had arrived so quietly in Purley, there being no cabs at that early hour at the station, that only his near neighbours had heard of his return; there had been few to notice his flushed face, and its bright expectant expression as he started.

Just before he came in sight of Appledore, at the end of the two hours' drive, which had sorely tried his patience, he began to doubt his own wisdom; surely his idea of taking Ruth by surprise had been boyish and foolish. Suppose he had

been mistaken in the meaning of her words? Suppose he had misread the penitence of her honest, generous nature, for the love which she could never feel for him? Only a loving woman, he thought, would be pleased to be thus taken by surprise. Perhaps he had made a mistake. If he had waited to announce his coming, he should have guessed in a moment from her first reception, whether her feelings had really changed towards him.

It was now too late to turn back, and indeed, Michael was too much overwrought to give up his purpose.

He drove round by the farm-yard, where he found George Bird with a bit of straw in his mouth, lounging against a post. It seemed to Mr. Clifford that the man was disturbed at seeing him, but his manner was unusually respectful.

He said, in answer to Michael's question, that so far as he knew, Mrs. Clifford was in.

"She'll be mebbe in the house-place," he added.

Michael left him at the outer gate ; there was no one to warn Ruth of her husband's coming.

He opened the door that led into the house-place from the farm-yard, and he saw her. She started and turned pale as his tall figure stood in the opening. For a moment she sat still, then she rose from her chair, smiled timidly, and went to him with both hands stretched out.

The sun had not shown himself that morning, the sky was still a louring grey, yet to Michael the bare big room was flooded with golden light, the glory of Ruth's sweet loveliness. . . . He had a vague, dim vision of a small figure lying stretched out below the window, and of two blue eyes staring at him, . . . but he was only conscious of Ruth, wildly conscious that his arms were round her, and that her sweet eyes smiled at him as he pressed her closely to his heart, and covered her blushing face with kisses.

He released her at last, drew her hand through his arm, and took her to the

parlour. Ruth felt as if it was a dream, but it was very sweet to the girl to be thus taken possession of, to feel herself beside her husband and to rest her head on Michael's shoulder, for she was sure that he had forgiven her.

At last, she drew herself away, and looked up timidly at her husband. "Please let me tell you everything," she said humbly; "I have so much to say."

He bent his head and listened gravely, while she told the story of her credulous love; she did not spare herself, and she merely related the facts about Bevington. She said that her own folly had encouraged him, and that no excuse could be made for her.

Michael tried to stop her penitent confession, but he could not, she begged him so earnestly to listen; and when she had ended there was another silence. Then for answer, he took her in his arms, and strained her tightly to his heart.

Ruth knew that she was not dreaming

now, Michael had forgiven her, and she loved him for his goodness to her.

She looked up at him presently with a bright smile.

“All this time I am forgetting that you must be hungry; if you really mean me to be your wife, I must take care of you, and see that you are not starved; Susan shall give us something to eat, she can cook quite nicely now.”

Half-way to the door she came back, and knelt down beside him, hiding her face from his adoring eyes.

“I have told you everything I have done or thought against you,” she said, very gravely; “and you would only serve me rightly, if you decide to cast me off—but, Michael, I could not bear it, I have learned that even—”

He was stooping to raise her, and he stopped her words with kisses.

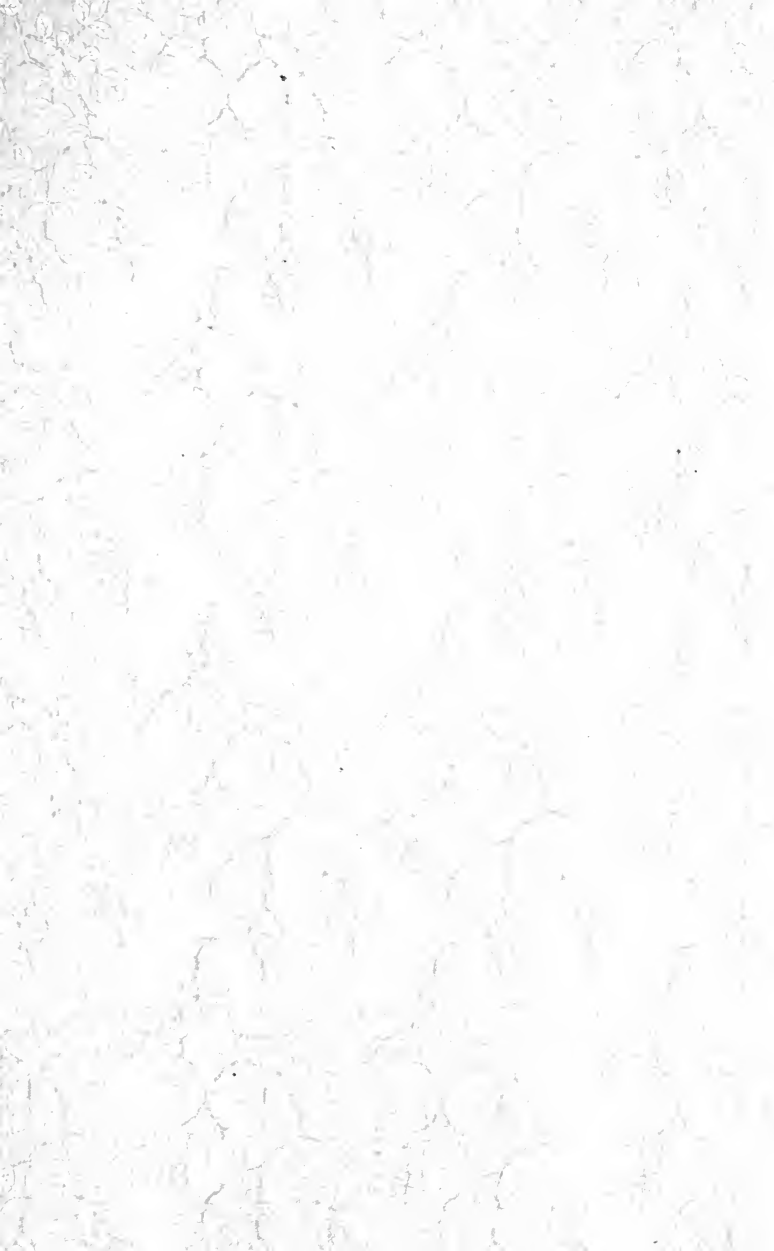
Her face cleared, and she gave him her old bright look.

“Remember,” she said, “it is you who

have settled it, you cannot undo your forgiveness, you cannot send me away now: you are too kind to make me unhappy, and I—I should be miserable without you.”

THE END.





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